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# FIRST NIGHTS

1934

IVOR NICHOLSON AND WATSON  
44 ESSEX STREET, STRAND, W.C.2

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## EPISTLE DEDICATORY TO MR. IVOR BROWN

MY DEAR IVOR,

In the 'nineties, which were the palmy days of dramatic criticism as well as of other things less respectable, it was Archer's custom to reprint a yearly volume entitled *The Theatrical World*. Each volume, as you will remember, was prefaced wittily or austere-ly according to the writer of that preface. The volume for 1893 began with a letter from Archer to a certain Robert W. Lowe, my ignorance of whom warns me how evanescent we are all. The preface for 1894 was initialled "G. B. S." and that for 1895 was contributed by Arthur W. Pinero. In 1896 Archer, obviously determined to stand no more nonsense, wrote his own preface, which ran to some fifty pages. What happened in 1897 I do not know, as I have never been able to procure the volume.

"What!" I imagine the casual reader exclaiming. "Does this fellow imagine that by so patent a device he can put himself and his colleagues on a level with the giant critics of the past?" My answer is simple. I do not so rate myself; Thou dost not so rate thyself. But the world and I so rate you, and that among other things is the reason why I offer you this book.

Another reason is that if ever I were in want of a second opinion about a play or a player, it is to you that I should unhesitatingly turn. First because of my high opinion of the soundness of your judgment; and second because your first thought coincides with my last, which is to tell readers about the play and how it was acted. But a critic should not, in my view, stand in need of any second opinion; he is a tub which must stand on its own bottom.

For his readers' sake he must have the arrogance to put himself in the position of the leading authority from which there can be no appeal. Confidence in the doctor is half the cure, and the reader of dramatic criticism must feel that his mentor is in no possible doubt whatever.

'Tis not unknown to you—as the wretched Bassanio phrases it—that I have had previous adventures in republishing dramatic criticism. Perhaps it would be fairer to say that it is my publishers who have had the adventures, since it was they who put out to sea and I who was left on the safe shore of an advance royalty never to be earned. These death-or-glory boys have been seven in number, and are now eight if I add my good friends Ivor Nicholson and Watson, who if they are fools will repent them of their folly, and if saints must regard the publication of this book as a good deed shining in a naughty world. In the past C. E. Montague, Arnold Bennett and Noel Coward have contributed prefaces, and I am sure that in the improbable event of a succeeding volume the hint will not be lost upon you. Indeed there might very well be another volume if the donkeys who never want books of this kind until they are out of print and then are all agog to get hold of them would buy this one before it is pulped. But that is unlikely.

All theatre-lovers must be concerned with what is popularly called "the menace of the films." The phrase has a nineteen-thirtyish ring about it, and probably it does not mean to-day quite what it meant then. Four years ago, when the talkies first became bearable, it was thought that they would be in such direct competition with the theatre that one could survive only on condition that the other perished. That supposition is not now the bogey it was; the theatre has retained its old public and the film has created a new one. Occasionally, but not often the two audiences come together, though for such a heavenly mingle—as Cleopatra puts it—the screen needs a Laughton or a Robeson. Then do the cinema first-nighters again put on their gay clothes; if they cannot be seen they presume that their presence is felt.

Again, I dislike the word "menace," for this is a pejorative word suggesting the approach of something evil. Sound-projection is a part of the wonders of Nature, and rightly used it cannot be anything but good. It is absurd to resent these innovations, which are the flowerings of Man's scientific mind as much as the early crocus is a part of earth's renewal. Where the word "menace" still has meaning is in the attitude of those who, through financial interest in the films, persuade themselves that to injure the theatre is to advance the cinema. I refer to the deliberate suppressing of interest in playgoing in that section of the Press which derives a large income from cinema advertisements. Papers which formerly gave handsome space to the new plays now give either no space at all or an amount which is wholly negligible.

Worse still, these papers employ as dramatic critics young men without either the age, experience, education, culture, natural taste, or critical perception which should qualify them for the delicate profession of dramatic critic. They are never members of the Critics' Circle, since, being here to-day and gone to-morrow, they have never time to be. But while they are here their employment is an affront to distinguished artists who must see many years' growth of talent and sometimes genius sacrificed to the ignorant caprices of little boys.

I remember an amusing incident which happened in a theatre a year or so ago. At the end of the first act an unkempt child came up to me and said, "What do you think of the play, Mr. Agate?" I patted him on the shoulder, said how glad I was to see a lad of his age taking an interest in the theatre, but added that no member of the public should ever ask a critic for his opinion. I was fumbling for a shilling to give him to spend on chocolates when poor dear Alan Parsons, who had overheard, gave me a prodigious wink. As we moved to the bar Alan said, "You put your foot in it that time, old man. That little boy is the dramatic critic of the *Sunday* —."

I am tempted to ask, my dear Ivor, what you and I can do to change the hearts of the proprietors of this Sunday paper and its like. It is a matter which you as this year's distinguished President of the Critics' Circle might profitably consider. As your Vice-President I trust that by the end of your term of office this difficult and possibly dangerous task will have been successfully accomplished. In other words, having loaded the gun for you, I hope you will find some way to fire it.

Yours ever,

JAMES AGATE.

*Livingstone Cottage,  
Hadley Green,  
Barnet.*

*March 26th, 1934.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I desire to thank Mr. Alan Dent for the wit and care with which he has devised the Index.

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## BACK TO THE 'NINETIES

*Arts.*

*Wednesday, October 15, 1930.*

### "LITTLE EYOLF"

#### Revival of Ibsen's Play

THE proper study of mankind is monster. Such appears to have been the maxim of this frock-coated ogre retiring behind palisade of whisker and upper-lip like a portcullis to demonstrate that the goodliest-looking apples are rottenest at the core. Now it may be said of naughty ogres as of naughty children that one shouldn't encourage them, and though in the far-away 'nineties those critics who had no glimmer of what the new drama was up to reproved Ibsen amply, those who understood "the movement" outvied each other in petting and fussing its chief exponent. Of "Little Eyolf" Archer doubted whether "its soul-searching be not too terrible for human endurance in the theatre," the truth about this play being that it has a masterly first act followed by two others which, as Archer incautiously let out later on, are "sheer analysis, poignant and pathetic, but the reverse of enlivening." Now that Ibsen has been definitely and finally hoisted into place there can be no harm in saying that nowhere else throughout the great works is dullness so rampant as it is in the last half of this play, the chasm between its two tortured souls finding its image in the spectator's yawn.

While Archer was thus whirling in ecstasy in the daily Press, Mr. Shaw was doing a similar dance in the weekly. Ibsen's disconcerting discoveries about the nature of marriage and parenthood and his horrid digs at the people who contract both liabilities are not, said Mr. Shaw, particular to introspectives living morosely on the margins

delight and ingenuity with which the bereaved couple tear and rend each other.

But how do we fare if we suppose the drama to be particular and local instead of universal? Even here Ibsen applies his excessive cerebration to the formulation of rules for a humanity which, thank Heaven, has considerably fewer brains! Like all exorbitant thinkers Ibsen is never so happy as when he is knocking his head against one of Nature's unshakable walls. The whole burden of "Little Eyolf" is that marriage should be a disinterested, rationalistic partnership instead of that sentimental contract whereby two people claim the power to possess and, it is alleged, so destroy each other. It is the old conflict between the laws of Nature and the niceties of Great Thought. But blundering, sentimental marriages continue to take place, whereas the kind of marriage prescribed by great thinkers has every advantage except that nobody will undertake it. Ibsen will not consent that his characters should muddle through or jog along. If there is an obstacle they must bark their shins. He will not let them see the road for pitfalls or allow them any use for milestones except to hang round the neck. We, living in the twentieth century, have heard of compromise; Ibsen's Norwegians cannot abide it. It comes to this, then, that it is a wise policy to take the art-value of the plays as cash, and leave the moral credit to the days when husbands in deer-stalkers and wives in leg-of-mutton sleeves pedalled for exercise and dear life round Battersea Park on the newly invented safety-bicycle.

The acting was of three kinds—brilliant, adequate, and praiseworthy. As Rita Miss Jean Forbes-Robertson showed the most remarkable advance in an actress's art that has ever come under my observation. She was formerly a child, playing with all a child's grace and earnestness and, by some accident of divination, rightly. She is now grown to woman's stature and has become an actress, able to play not only Cordelia but Regan, not only Viola but Rita. Her exquisite beauty and fragility remain, and, being the

artist that she is, she did not try to force her portrayal of Ibsen's difficult character beyond the limitations imposed by her physique. Janet Achurch made Rita a physically superb, ranting, roaring tigress. Miss Forbes-Robertson has neither the voice nor the presence for this, and she wisely softened Rita to something less than her full animalism. For the rest, her performance had subtlety, power, beauty of pose and movement and gesture, of tone and phrasing, and, most important in an Ibsen actress, gave you the full certainty that she was never in intention one second behind her author.

As Asta, a noble creature who cannot help being flatter than a pancake, Miss Dorothy Holmes-Gore made the necessary sacrifices. As the Rat Wife Miss Marie Ault was Ibsen's "thin little shrunken figure, old and grey-haired" to the life. But if Mrs. Campbell was right the Rat Wife should partly tread the floor of mysticism and not wholly that wretched suburban carpet. Miss Ault played this supernatural part very well except that she omitted the supernatural; her Rat Wife was anybody's charlady. As Allmers Mr. Ernest Milton whined and moaned, tossed an aloof head, looked unutterable things, and, in general, resembled Bunthorne without any of that poet's innocent fun. But the character is deadly anyhow, and should be relegated to the index of the unactable. As the ghastly Eyolf Master Peter Penrose, looking as if he would have been happier picking a peck of pickled peppers, acted nicely; and as Borgheim, the road-maker, Mr. Robert Speaight wore one of yesterday's Norfolk suits and gave the impression that he would have preferred mending one of to-day's roads to acting in this shocking part.

ing the minds and bodies of the whole French people at every moment of their lives, on every possible pretence, and without any check or control but their own mild paternal sentiments towards them, as among the *menus plaisirs*, the chief points of etiquette, the immemorial privileges, and favourite amusements of Kings, Priests, and Nobles, from the beginning to the end of time, without which the bare title of King, Priest, or Noble would not have been worth a groat.

If ever Mr. Shaw feels like upsetting another apple-cart, I suggest to him that of *le Roi Soleil*.

Perhaps one of the best ways to concoct yet another play about the Mask would be to build one round Mr. Nelson Keys and let the prisoner be everybody and anybody in turn. Unfortunately, M. Rostand as a young intellectual is remote from flippancy. He has persuaded himself that the proper thing to do with this subject is to use it as the theme for a sermon on statecraft, the preacher being Cardinal Mazarin. His first act is duller than anything his father achieved, and begins with a scene in which Miss Margaret Webster, as Saint Mars's daughter, while arranging some crinkly flowers falls into anticipatory passion for the new prisoner, whose bed Mrs. Tom Wise is industriously making. Then the Mask enters, and indulges in torrents of Gummidgean woe. He feels being in a mask "more than most people." He also asks a number of questions about the world he has never seen, and betrays an innocence which would have delighted the authors of "The Golden Butterfly,"—"What is a king?" and so forth.

The second act introduces us to Louis Quatorze, whereby we realise that M. Rostand has plumped for the twin-brother theory. Young Louis is not fulfilling Mazarin's notions of being a good boy, principally by objecting to his proposed marriage with Maria Theresa. Whereupon Mazarin, to teach him a lesson, claps the mask on him and trots out his double, who is taken to the Louvre and

allowed to wake up in the King's bed. At this point the clouds of symbolism, which have been threatening all the evening, break. For the prisoner decides that the mask of royalty, about which he knows nothing whatever, is a more hateful thing than the mask of velvet with which we had understood him to be dissatisfied. He would feel being a king more than most people, and so on and so forth. So back he goes to prison, and Louis, haled therefrom and told about his double, is asked by Mazarin whether he will now be good. Whereupon this really rather silly monarch suggests that, like Marco and Giuseppe in "The Gondoliers," he and the Mask should rule together. Don Alhambra—I mean Cardinal Mazarin—curtly negatives this. The play ends with the death of the Mask, supported by the Queen Mother, who at last recognises that Richelieu, when he declared the second twin still-born, told a whopper.

The piece was very, very long and very, very serious, the greater part of it being taken up with terrific speeches by Mazarin on statecraft and the life after death. I hope it is not too harsh to say that on this latter question the flat denials of a bright young dramatist from Paris must sometimes weary the ear of a people which has listened to the voice of another playwright. I confess that I felt an impatient itch to send M. Rostand a copy of Shakespeare, marking Edgar's "Men must endure Their going hence, even as their coming hither——"; Feeble's "We owe God a death! I'll ne'er bear a base mind——"; together with Hamlet's sundry observations on the subject. M. Rostand's naïve pessimism would, I think, be deemed jejune at an undergraduates' debating society, while his remarks about statecraft said less than I can remember in the longest speeches I have ever known. If only it had occurred to Mazarin to jettison M. Rostand and read us a chapter of "The Prince," with which volume he did on one occasion optimistically toy! But it was not to be, and the actor, whom we took to be Mr. Lewin Mannering, though the name was not on the programme, comported himself

as one intending that his last syllable should synchronise with that of recorded time.

Miss Beatrice Wilson brought her always lovely art to the part of the Queen-Mother, and also was left out of the programme except as producer! To omit two principal parts and players is either gross carelessness or a subscription to the theory that sedulous inefficiency is a mark of high art. In either case it is annoying. Mr. John Wyse, in the dual rôle of prisoner and King, acted with great care and intelligence, though I am not to be persuaded that Louis minced his vowels in the modern Bloomsbury manner. Nor could this actor quite get over that awkward moment when Louis knuckled under for good. Louis was twenty, which corresponds to our thirty, and I cannot believe that the greatest King, or even "the greatest player at kingship," the world has ever seen would have consented to a position in which his Minister could at any time "snooker" him with his twin-brother. Michelet's Louis would have made an end of one or the other, and perhaps both.

M. Rostand followed Michelet's view of the character pretty closely until he came to the difficulty always happening to historical playwrights whose plots bring them up against known facts. For, presumably, Louis never had wind of any twin. Mr. H. St. Barbe-West made a sympathetic gaoler. As his daughter Psyche, which seems an odd name, Miss Margaret Webster did very well till a couple of horse-pistols put an end to her. But then a young woman who insisted upon blurting out to majesty the existence of an unwanted brother must have expected to be put on the spot! Mr. John H. Foulds was responsible for some agreeable trumpet fanfares connoting the arrival of the court, discreetly assembled off stage, and otherwise mitigated the *longueurs* of an evening far too long.

## NOT A MASTERPIECE

*Lyric.*

*Tuesday, February 3, 1931.*

### "STRANGE INTERLUDE"

A Play. By Eugene O'Neill

"Which I mean to say, Pip——."—JOE GARGERY.

"MEANTERSAYING" plays a double rôle in this piece. It is its gist and the reason for its extraordinary length. As all the world knows by now, Mr. O'Neill makes his characters interlard everything they say with asides containing what they are really thinking. "Having no hearts, partner?" has queried many a polite bridge-player when his mind was really saying: "Why doesn't the silly fellow play a heart? I know he's got a fistful of 'em!" This illustration, though homely, is a good one if it serves to show Mr. O'Neill's new way with the aside. New, because it is claimed that our author is only doing elaborately what others have done sketchily. Shakespeare uses the soliloquy, so why shouldn't O'Neill?—is the argument. To which there is this answer, that they use it with a profound difference. Here and there in Shakespeare there may be a melodramatic villain who says one thing and goes on to explain that he means the exact opposite, whereas this is nearly the whole of Mr. O'Neill's method. We are to note that where the earlier dramatist is really in earnest he entirely abandons the aside at the very point where Mr. O'Neill would have most use for it. When Lady Macbeth welcomes Duncan to the castle she says: "We rest your hermits!" and leaves it at that, whereas Mr. O'Neill would have made her add: "And if my husband and I remain anything of the sort, our name isn't Cawdor!" In the great third act of "Othello" Shakespeare is content to let Iago's lies speak for themselves, just as he leaves it to



his audience to find out for itself the truth about Lear's daughters. Briefly, Shakespeare uses the aside as an amplification, a foreshadowing, or a hint, whereas Mr. O'Neill uses it almost entirely in contradiction, a use which another good dramatist, Ibsen, utterly scorned.

Take that moment when Tesman returns home and Hedda asks him whether he enjoyed himself at Judge Brack's. Tesman says: "Have you been anxious about me, eh?" and Hedda replies: "No, I should never think of being anxious. But I asked if you had enjoyed yourself." Whereby we see that Ibsen, being a dramatist to his finger-tips, has no need of an aside to explain Hedda's complete contempt for her husband. Mr. O'Neill cannot, or will not, do this by the *oratio recta* method, so to speak, and when in this play he wants to express Nina's contempt for her husband he must first plump Sam down on the sofa with some fatuously marital remark, in reply to which Nina has to voice to the audience her unspoken thought: "God, give me the chance one day to tell this fool the truth!" As far as this part of the method is concerned it seems to me to show Mr. O'Neill not as a better, but as a much less good dramatist than his forerunners, any one of whom upon reading his script would probably have said: "Capital notion, my boy. Why not make a play of it?"

The method is still further extended to tip the audience the wink as to matters which could not possibly be conveyed in stage dialogue. Thus one character will say about another:—"What about exploding a bomb under him and seeing if that will make him talk? But not too big a bomb or I shall frighten the speech out of him altogether!" Here, surely, Mr. O'Neill confounds the function of the playwright with that of the novelist, and indeed large portions of the play are like a novel read aloud, first the characters talking and then the author talking about his characters.

So much for the manner. What now of the matter to which it is applied? Here one must argue that a play

which has been called a great tragedy must contain matter of universal interest, so that the normal audience can be subject to the familiar pity and terror. But this play's interest is particular even to the point of being "curious," in the second-hand bookseller's sense of that word. Consider the theme. Nina loses her fiancé in the war, and, in despair at not having given herself to him, becomes the mistress of whoever cares to take her. To cure her of this, Darrell, a doctor, recommends marriage with Sam, an able-bodied simpleton. At this point the play completely breaks its back, because it can only be continued by the forced addition of a new theme which does not grow out of what has gone before. *It so happens* that Sam has a grandfather, a father, and even an aunt, who have all become insane, and Sam's mother informs Nina that she must not allow Sam's child to be born, and that she must later bear him a child by some healthy father. Nina consents to both sacrifices, which is astonishing in a woman who nowhere exhibits fortitude, will, or any trait whatever except an overwhelming and predatory egotism. The rest of the play is a discussion as to whether Nina loves her dead fiancé, her husband, Darrell, who is her child's father, or the family friend who, in a part longer than Hamlet, has meandered introspectively throughout the play.

"It so happens," which was the strength of Greek drama dependent upon the whims of unreasonable gods, is a weakness in post-Shakespearean tragedy dependent upon human failings. There is no reason why Nina, recovering from her first emotional mischance, should have stumbled upon a husband with this medical history, though this does not mean more than that Mr. O'Neill has tried to make a whole out of one odd and one end. A more grievous fault is that this play has no discernible tragic implication. A tragedy, to be worth the name, must contain a moving and skilfully told story, profound analysis of human character, vitality, philosophical significance, beauty. The story of "Strange Interlude"

is held together by the safety-pin of accident, and the technique of its telling is pretentious and wearisome. The characters are not human beings, but entries in a neuropath's case-book; few members of an audience will identify themselves with the sex-harassed virago who dominates this play, with her complex-ridden and unwholesome father, with the highly unprofessional doctor, or with the poor introspective fish. The play is morbid and rotten with decay; there is no vitality, vigour, or anything approaching life in it, and no character has any preoccupation except sex. The essence of tragedy is fallen nobility; there is nothing in this play's characters to lay low.

On the other side of the account must be put the fact that Mr. O'Neill has a mind, however much one may dislike its present texture. He has some of Strindberg's power of regarding the world as an asylum and peopling it appropriately, and the same uncanny gift of creating and holding you with his unpleasant situations. There can be no doubt about the reality of the characters who fascinate without arousing sympathy, and there is even the risk that an actress of genius will wheedle some sort of maudlin sympathy for Nina, continually yapping after happiness and doing nothing to deserve it. There is this to be said, too, that out of nothing nothing can be made, and that this company of very remarkable players could not have achieved its prodigies without some sufficient material. Miss Mary Ellis is very nearly a great actress, and Mr. Erskine Sanford as the father, Mr. Basil Sydney as the doctor, Mr. Donald Macdonald as the husband, and Mr. Ralph Morgan as the poor fish all gave displays of acting founded on sheer brainwork, which compelled attention to the last of their far too many words. I am not greatly concerned with the thousands of nights this play has run, and dollars it has coined, since a dinner-interval alone is stunt enough to start a movement and subjugate a continent. Mr. Gilbert Miller deserves everybody's thanks for giving London the chance to see this

play, even though it may condemn it, and Mr. O'Neill as an experimentalist is worthy of anybody's steel. The audience was impressed by, in this order, the acting, the wilfully shabby scenery, the penumbral lighting, and the play's air of being the intellectual goods. But were I pressed for a summarised opinion as to whether "Strange Interlude" is a great play, I should reply in the words of Joe Gargery:—"Pip, which I mean to say that were not a question requiring a answer betwixt yourself and me, and which you know the answer to be full well No."

## MOTHER AND SON

*St. James's.*

*Tuesday, February 17, 1931*

### "ETIENNE"

A Comedy. By Jacques Deval. English Version by  
Gilbert Wakefield

"Now gather, and surmise," said Polonius. The reader will have to do his own gathering and surmising in connection with this, to use the current phrase, hot-making play. Where the playwright has forborne to tread, verbally speaking, it would be foolish for the dramatic critic to overflow, and I hasten to certify that on the surface, and lying unacted on any Censor's table, M. Deval's play is as cup-and-saucerish as the mother of any English Miss could desire and that Miss deplore. But M. Deval is a French playwright, and as such knows perfectly well that a wink is as good as a nod to an audience which is only as blind as it wants to be. In this comedy he winks not only prodigiously but Freudianly, with the result that, while the unskilful playgoer may grieve, the judicious will certainly laugh.

In support of the foregoing, and to prove how doubly our French author intends, let me say that this play, which ostensibly shows how a naughty little boy gets a tyrannical father under his thumb, is really about what the pretentious, if I mistake not, call the *Œdipus complex*. Etienne, aged seventeen or thereabouts, is a sullen little beast who alternates sulks with practical joking. Thus he collects and spends hundred-franc notes from relatives on the plea that his father has been decorated and must be fêted. No glamour of this kind has befallen his father, who is manager of the complaints department in a drapery stores. M. Lebarmécide—heavenly name!—sum-

mons a family council, at which he promulgates his decision that the boy shall go to boarding-school.

This brings into action Mme. Lebarmécide, whom we have hitherto seen as the submissive spouse meekly condoning her husband's gallantries with his stores' fair complainers. Now she is a lioness who will not be robbed of her unique whelp for whom she feels so tenderly. Etienne shall stay at home. Encouraged by this initial victory, the boy begins a series of practical jokes, the first of which is to telephone the head of the stores in the guise of a General whose wife has not welcomed Lebarmécide's advances. Next he discovers that his father intends to deceive, in the French sense, a friend of forty years' standing who has married a Russian featherbrain. The boy cannot bear that his mother should be so treated, and in her defence takes on the job, wholly nauseating to this innocent, of forestalling his father.

There is a great deal here that is extremely amusing, though I shall not have space to tell in detail how Lebarmécide clears the coast for his assignation by sending his wife to a totally unnecessary funeral; how Etienne makes the coast still clearer by pretending to swallow salts of lemon and sending his father for some far-fetched antidote; how Etienne is forestalled by the lady whose embraces he disgustfully accepts for his mother's sake. In the last act we see Etienne master of the situation. Lebarmécide has been degraded to the catalogue department,\* where his style, "approximating too closely to that of Victor Hugo," is manifestly unsuitable for the catalogues which now Etienne writes on condition that his father remains faithful to his mother.

The core of the play is in this; first, that Etienne, hoist with his own petard, has fallen in love with his mistress, who has now run off with somebody else; and, second, that on hearing of the adventure the mother slaps her son's face, being prompted thereto by something in excess of maternal solicitude. Then, rising to self-immolation in her turn, this possibly too devoted mother decides

to look the other way if the over-pretty *bonne* should exceed her duties.

This play was probably easier to translate than to transplant. To begin with it demanded one of those tiny, over-heated, over-crowded French theatres where the playgoer is compensated for his physical discomfort by the presence of inspired buffoons and serious actors who have retained the knack of appearing casual. At our handsome, authoritative St. James's Theatre, the piece only just avoided taking on a portentousness of which there was never any question in that smart little cubby-hole in Paris. But the stage was too big, and though this could not be helped, it was surely a mistake to allow the Lebarmécides' drawing-room to give on to an immense hall instead of a tiny vestibule. In addition to the setting, the acting did not suggest the *petit bourgeois* stratum to which the characters belong. It could not, in my view, suggest any stratum, because there was nothing to pull together a team of players which, excellent individually, was as a whole all over the place.

To Miss Mary Clare, who can be the sum of all nobilities from Andalusian to Jewish, has been denied the gift of being the home-keeping yet natty Frenchwoman, and she made the play seem bigger than it is. As Etienne, Mr. Emlyn Williams, looking like an out-of-work Welsh miner, gave one the visual impression that he would presently doss up to invest his dole in the dogs. As the father, Mr. David Horne worked very hard to extract the maximum fun from the pompous and dictatorial. But you could see him working, and he was never, as French comedians know so surely how to be, irresistibly droll. Miss Una O'Connor as a stray aunt was Liverpool-Irish; Mr. Stanley Lathbury as a stray uncle was obviously on a seven-day trip from a more circumspect country; and as the husband of the Russian lady, Mr. Henry Wenman exhibited a Dickensian quality of cheerful choler, as who should say Mr. Ambrose Manning in the rôle of Lawrence Boythorn. The importing of a genuinely foreign, exotic

creature like Mlle. Myno Burnet to play Etienne's mistress devastated the composition in the way that a real clock ticking through a hole used to destroy those otherwise credible oleographs of the Houses of Parliament. Alone in the cast, Mr. Marcus Barron, who played the proprietor of the drapery stores, located this piece in Paris, thereby repeating the feat he achieved in "Topaze."

Illusion is a kittle thing, and I do not propose broken English, or anything of the sort. But if the cast had had, say, an all-English homogeneity, we could have made one adjustment which would have done for the lot. Instead we were confronted with an English, Welsh and Irish agglomeration which put the piece on to no plane at all and called for too frequent adjustments. The notion, too, that a character which is foreign among foreigners calls for a foreign actress strikes me as extravagant nonsense. But if one could be insensitive to the fact that this was not a circle of wholly insignificant French bourgeois and could turn from one brilliant performance to another, why, then, how admiringly must one write! Miss Clare played throughout with exquisite subtlety and beautifully controlled emotion. Mr. Williams used so much artistry and intelligence that he overcame natural disadvantages and generously succeeded where the better-graced juvenile, who relies solely upon his graces, must have failed. He was, however, a little inclined to be inaudible; in the théâtre, as in the concert-room, even the shyest pianissimo should be heard. Against this, let me put the fact that he looked gipsy enough to be at least un-English and so possibly French. Of Mr. Horne, I want to say this, that one admires without any reservation whatever the way in which this good actor insists upon acting and continually declines to be merely himself. It follows, then, that any lover of acting must get more fun out of seeing Mr. Horne in a succession of new rôles than in watching some leading fashionable put on a succession of new lounge-suits.



"Etienne" is an extremely witty and amusing piece, brilliantly acted if one disregards the fact that nothing which happens on the St. James's stage can be conceived as taking place in Paris. The activities of Mr. Barron excepted.

## MR. TEARLE'S HAMLET

Haymarket.

Tuesday, March 3, 1931.

### "HAMLET"

#### Revival of Shakespeare's Tragedy

"What man is there, now living, who can present before us all those changing and prismatic colours with which the character of Hamlet is invested?"—MRS. CURDLE.

MR. GODFREY TEARLE, taking up the part at two days' notice in consequence of Mr. Ainley's illness, certainly showed that after six years he had not lost the trick of it. There were one or two verbal slips. Probably at succeeding performances Mr. Tearle has not said: "See what a grace was seated on this *face*!" and in the line "To give the world assurance of a man" has not stopped at the word "of" and begun an entirely meaningless sentence with the words "a man." He should certainly not have said, "Hell itself breathes out Contagion to this *vile* world," since Hamlet leaves the vileness for granted. Civilisation did not crumble when, in reply to Polonius's "The actors are come hither, my lord!" Mr. Tearle said "Buzz" *three* times, but he certainly showed *trop de zèle*. Hamlet's first soliloquy was going well until the passage:

A little month, or ere those shoes were old  
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,  
Like Niobe, all tears—

Here Mr. Tearle turned the second line into:—

With which like Niobe she follow'd my poor father's body all tears!

At this point, down, so to speak, came baby, cradle, and all! But this actor is no Humpty-Dumpty, and Hamlet was soon himself again.

The Closet scene was drastically cut and made to end with Hamlet's—

So, again, good night.  
I must be cruel, only to be kind:  
Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind.

This was unfortunate, for, except on the supposition that Shakespeare is indulging in a bit of nonsense—an unsafe supposition in this grand and close-knit scene—Hamlet must mean something by this couplet. He probably means that having to give his mother a wiggling is bad, but that having to kill his stepfather is going to be worse. But surely it must be an aside, for in the full scene the order of thought is as follows. Hamlet says, "Once more, good night!" and follows this by that bit about the blessings. He next deals with Polonius's death: "For this same lord," etc., etc., after which he again says good night. I suggest that our couplet, which now follows, must be an aside, because Hamlet, far from intending to hint to his mother that further trouble is brewing, turns to her again with, "One word more, good lady," and advises her categorically against the King's questionings. But no actor of flesh, blood and amour-propre can be expected to end the biggest scene in the play with an aside, and since the bit about Polonius was also cut we were treated to the spectacle of Hamlet kneeling with a lump in his throat at the words—

And when you are desirous to be blest,  
I'll blessing beg of you—

after which, half rising, he said: "So again, good night!" and when he had completely got to his feet waved his arms in front of Gertrude and frightened the life out of her with his tale of worse. Worse for whom and in what way the poor wretch was not to hear, and one went into the foyer wondering whether Gertrude awake at night would be any happier than Lady Macbeth asleep. Mr. Tearle was not responsible for the cutting, and if the scene had to end nonsensically one agrees that the actor was right to do it grandiloquently.

Elsewhere Mr. Tearle avoids anything approaching bombast, the soliloquies being given without any hint of bravura, conversationally, as between members of the same club. "Let's straighten this out!" Hamlet seems to say, looking after the retreating First Player and turning in his chair to ask fellow-members whether it is not monstrous, etc., etc. One lingers over these details from a natural reluctance to come to the point, which is that Mr. Tearle's performance, though noble and extremely moving, has almost nothing of Hamlet in it. His "nighted colour" is the plainest assumption; not to set one's life "at a pin's fee" bespeaks a sickness incredible in one obviously compact of healthful zests; the brag about the Nemean lion's nerve, so manifestly the vaunt of delicate physique, loses its meaning in this case, just as the later "Out of my weakness and my melancholy" is the clearest of wilful misstatements. But these are physical matters, and no actor is to be blamed because he cannot subtract a cubit from his stature.

Most important of all, this Hamlet has no vacillation and knows nothing of subterfuge. There is never any real doubt in Hamlet's mind as to whether the Ghost is honest, "Grounds more relative than this" being the merest pretext for delay. This brings us to the "Now might I do it pat" speech, wherein some critics, one thinks wrongly, have seen a Renaissance malignity which would pursue vengeance into the next world. But Hamlet's play-trick having turned out only too successfully, he is now at his wits' end for further excuse, and this notion about "a more horrid hent" is the very ticket. In either case poor Mr. Tearle is in a fearful difficulty. His appearance connotes all your Anglo-Saxon indifference to, and contempt for, anything resembling quattro-cento subtlety, and as he has been a mountain of resolution from his first entrance, the pretence that we are looking at Shakespeare's Hamlet must at this point be abandoned.

Now, Mr. Tearle as Horatio is streets better than any other actor one has ever seen in the part or could imagine.

Everything about him breathes the loyalty, the burly-tender and "faithful Dobbin" aspect of that character, and perhaps I can best describe Mr. Tearle's Hamlet by saying that he plays it like Horatio translated. The result is a masterpiece of contradiction. Hamlet wins every heart before he has got his first diffident sentence off his determined chest. But he has won by a forthrightness and simplicity which shut and bar the door against the mental sickness to come. *Mens sana in corpore sano* is an admirable motto, but not this character's device.

Mr. Malcolm Keen's King is one of the best I have ever seen, whereas the Queen of that delicious comedienne, Miss Irene Vanbrugh, is one of the least convincing. The cockneyism of her "Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour *orf!*" settles that. Of Miss Fay Compton it is perhaps unnecessary to say that one actress only has exceeded the beauty and pathos of her Ophelia. Mr. Dennis Hoey's Horatio is a rather gaunt and occasionally forgetful garnisher of Hamlet's bosom; Mr. Herbert Waring as Polonius is almost too authentic a bore; while if Elsinore can be credited with a Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, then Mr. Tristan Rawson's Laertes is obviously its perpetual President. That good actor, Mr. Robert Speaight, is in the unfortunate position of having too little thew and sinew for the First Player but too much for Osric, which parts he doubles. Mr. Tom Reynolds has great fun with the Gravedigger, and in the matter of stoups of liquor Mr. Norman Page fetches and carries with a will. Lastly, Mr. Baliol Holloway's Ghost delivers his speech as though he has nothing else with which to while away Eternity. Perhaps he is right.

## A FINE PLAY

*Royalty.*

*Wednesday Afternoon, April 1, 1931.*

### "THE WORLD OF LIGHT"

A Play. By Aldous Huxley

To say that this play is about spiritualism is like saying that "Much Ado" is about mistaken identity or that "Romeo and Juliet" is based on the defective postal service between Verona and Mantua. Spiritualism is merely its peg, and thereby, as this play's inveterate cliché-monger would put it, hangs a tale. Perhaps not so much a tale as a tally, since there are few things under the sun which are not taken into account, though one frankly admits "under the sun" to be a niggling interpretation of the scope of Mr. Huxley's mind, which here goes sizzling about all the space there is, consuming itself and us.

The way of it is this, if it be permitted to pin down interstellar cerebration to a local habitation and a lot of names. The scene is the drawing-room of some people called Wenham. Mr. Wenham (Mr. Aubrey Mather) is a chartered accountant who sets out on the uncharted sea of spiritualism. He is meek, intellectually honest, though without enough intellect to make that difficult, and wrapped in so much humility that he always speaks of himself in the third person. "One is a teetotaller. One took a drink once but it disagreed with one." Mrs. Wenham (Miss Margaret Halstan) is the sheet-anchor of the drifting Wenham ménage: "I do not believe that communication with the dead is possible, and if it were I should not care for it." And again: "Heaven and earth may pass away, but there's got to be dinner!" To this pair has been born a son, Hugo (Mr. Denys Blakelock), a young man at

Cambridge and presumably a fainéant, since he is world-weary without having done a thing in the world to tire him. It is into this character that Mr. Huxley spills some of his familiar brainsickness just as he uses Hugo's friend, Bill Hamblin (Mr. Sebastian Shaw), as outlet for the famous exuberance. Bill is a talker among talkers, and perhaps this is the place to say that the dialogue throughout is a close web of sheen and shimmer, the warp of everybody else's outlandish speculations being knit together by Mrs. Wenham's home-keeping woof.

The ball is set in motion—that is presuming anything in Mr. Huxley's mind can ever have started from rest—in this way. They are discussing clothes. The volatile Hamblin, for whom the meanest topic is springboard to infinity, jumps from animadversion upon short skirts to a declaration in favour of a well-draped universe with plenty of mystery. "I hear the Absolute is being worn longer this year!" This is the modulation which gets us from the key of small-talk to that of metaphysics, whence it is only a step to Hamblin's recollection that prior to a visit to Borneo he was an agnostic and would have remained one had not certain dark practices under that high sun turned him into a devil-worshipper. Talking of Borneo, he is off to Guiana, British or otherwise, by aeroplane first thing to-morrow morning. Will Hugo accompany him? Now Hugo happens to be in the devil of a mess. He is loved by Enid Deckle (Miss Fabia Drake), whom he dislikes, but to whom, through some odd blackmailing on the part of his better self, he has become engaged. Hamblin makes Hugo drunk and persuades him to cut the cable of his melancholy love-affair and that still duller professorship at Cambridge which is all that young man's future. Before he knows where he is, Hugo is whisked off to Guiana.

But not before he has let us know where we, the audience, are in the matter of the spiritualism of Wenham *père*. Here Mr. Huxley is at his old trick of beginning with some frivolous remark, idle as a stone thrown into a pond,

but having repercussions on the shores of heaven and hell. "If," says Hugo, parodying his father, "one doesn't smoke or drink, hang it all, one must have some excitement! If not spirits, why not spiritualism?" Hugo goes on to explain that spiritualism is the result of wrong thinking on the part of the right-minded, and hence the sentimental association of unrelated ideas. Telepathy is one fact, and the dead are another; in spiritualist logic wish and thought are identical, therefore messages received must emanate from the quarter whence they are desired. Let the dead bury their dead! Hugo has impatiently exclaimed, to which—and this is the gist of the play—Mr. Wenham in all devoutness remarks that the author of this saying was a young man. We come here to the play's closest thinking, Wenham's amplification that for the young life is all that is to come, whereas for their elders life is what is past. How can the very old consent to bury that which is become their all? It should be said here that the play is neither for nor against spiritualism, though one detects the bias in the suggestion that it is better to concern ourselves with the living who are at their fullest point of our understanding rather than with the second or millionth best which is all we can hope to know of the dead in their new state.

This play, like some of Ibsen's, is in two storeys, an upper one of thought and a lower one of action. On the ground floor, so to speak, Hugo and Hamblin have crashed; and now Enid must explore an old torment. Can the spirit divorced from its envelope constitute any true survival of personality? What comfort to a lover can there be in abstraction? All this part of the play is immensely serious, and Mr. Huxley does not fear to cite such a phrase as "in a glass darkly" with all its immensities of reverberation. Miss Drake sustains Enid's agony very finely, and it is not her fault that she cannot make what follows credible. Séances have been established at the Wenhams', and messages are now received from Hugo through the mediumship of one Hubert (Mr. Philip Bran-



don). This is a preposterous slug who, believing in the fiction of Enid's dead lover, invents the kind of messages Enid would like to receive, and thus works upon her gratitude to the point at which she becomes his mistress, an incredible consummation in which the author permits himself another excursion away from real life. Now old Wenham is in his seventh heaven; his spiritualist theories have been proved, and incidentally he has sold sixteen thousand copies of a work of love and proselytism. He invites his publisher (witty Mr. Marcus Barron) to a sitting at which Hugo is to prove the truth of spiritualism. In the middle of the séance Hugo walks in! The aeroplane had come down, but neither has been killed, and Hugo pleads that to lie doggo for a period seemed to him and his friend to be no end of a lark.

Wenham is appalled by the prospect of having to make public renunciation of his theories, and there is something in Hugo's gibe that his father would prefer a live faith and a dead son to a whole Hugo and a theory blown to smithereens. Enid's case is even worse; she has become the spiritual wife—since the Hubert affair is on the material and negligible plane—of her idealised Hugo, and now finds that he dislikes her as much as ever. The solution comes from Hugo, who declares that Hubert is not wholly crooked, that there *were* messages not from himself being dead, but from some living and subconscious better self. He decides to go away for good, and so once more give place to that idealised self who will still be stage-managed by Hubert. His father need not write that letter to the Press, since who knows that they are not in the presence of a higher truth? As for Enid, she will console herself by consoling Hamblin, who, in the course of their peregrinations and a very long play, has become blind.

It cannot be said that this ending is satisfactory, since it shelves one difficulty only to create others. Mr. Huxley does not confound the spiritualists, but neither does he support them; the sum of the play's argument is that Hugo not being dead, what is normally meant by spiri-

tualism is not under examination. What is in question is telepathic communication through questionable mediumship between the subconscious mind and the conscious, which strikes one as the roundabout delivery of an impracticable message of doubtful provenance. On the human plane this dragging in of the subconscious is not very satisfying, since human affections have always found body and conscious mind to be a sufficient complication. Surely Mr. Huxley must see that to fall in love with the subconscious is rather like stroking the grin in the absence of the Cheshire Cat? But perhaps Enid does see this; it is certainly her tragedy. On the everyday plane, then, the nature of the theme precludes possibility of normal tidying up. But it is a great intellectual adventure to listen to and be present at, and on lower levels one ventures to congratulate Mr. Huxley upon having conceived his story for the stage and invented characters who are people as well as mouthpieces. Throughout, the visible and audible surfaces of life are admirably presented. Space does not permit me to describe the superb acting and how all of it is a glove-fit for the play's intricate convolutions. I must be content to say that in the matter of sustained interpretation the entire cast is beyond praise.

## THREE MASTERPIECES

*Arts.*

*Friday, June 12, 1931.*

### "NOE"

A Play. By André Obey

Presented by the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier

THERE is an old story of a journalist who called on Lucien Guitry and asked him what his son was writing. "A play!" mumbled the old actor, who was at breakfast. "Upon what subject?" asked the journalist, and through a barricade of sustenance the old man was understood to reply: "The Book of Genesis." "Who for?" pursued the interviewer. "Sarah Bernhardt!" said Guitry with finality. But the other was not to be dismissed so easily. "What part is Sarah to play?" he persisted. Guitry looked the young man full in the face and said: "Noah!" That which took place at the Arts Theatre on Friday night was not that play!

Not that one would put this theme beyond, as the nursemaids say, our Sacha; history, scriptural or secular, can have few bogeys for the man who can conceive the third Napoleon as hero. But M. Obey's piece has a background of seriousness not hitherto envisaged by our first boulevardier. At the beginning his piece would appear to be conceived in the vein of Halévy, who, in "Le Rêve," could write of Le Père Eternel "wearing his Early Italian manner." We see Noah tinkering away at and putting the last touches to his ark. He has already had what I can only describe as a confab with the Almighty, and now says: "Excusez-moi! Je regrette infiniment de vous déranger encore, mais faut-il mettre un gouvernail?" The question of the rudder being settled, the animals appear

—the bear, the lion, the baboon, the tiger, the heifer, the lamb, the wolf, and last the elephant—all wearing that humanised air of being slightly pleased with themselves so characteristic of the plates in Buffon. They go aboard, and now Noah's sons appear. On being shown the new construction Sem says: "C'est charmant! Qu'est-ce que c'est?" whereas Japhet is content to pronounce it "épantant," and Cham mildly wonders what has put the idea of a ship into the old man's head. Presently the mother arrives, and one gathers that married life with Noah has taught her not to be surprised at anything. Then enter the three virgins who are destined to re-people the earth, and finally we come to The Man, symbol of unthinking brute, who takes Noah for a sorcerer. Up to this point the play has worn the air of an operette without the music, as who should say "Le Bon Noé" instead of "La Belle Hélène." But now all Noah's world deems him mad, with his talk of rain in a season of drought, of sailing over parched land a hundred miles from the sea. Then falls the first drop. It falls upon the forehead of the brute, and with it a primitive earnestness comes into the play.

The second act shows us the deck of the ark forty days later. It is the first day of sun, and whoso wants to realise the atmosphere here has only to bethink him of the opening bars of Grieg's "Morning." Noah devises a romp for his family, in which all join. But the waste of waters continues, and the third act sees general discouragement. In his trouble Noah confides in the animals, telling them that they are not abandoned, but only a little neglected of God. With them he addresses a last confident prayer, and as he lies down to sleep the wind arises. This is a scene of simple and utter loveliness, for which, so far as I know, the author is indebted to nobody, though this in truth should be said of the whole play. In the fourth act Noah sends out his emissaries, and here again the quality of the emotion, compounded of simple writing and exquisite acting, amazes. The last act shows the grounding of the ark, the quarrel of the sons, their departure with

their wives to the ends of the earth, and Noah, sufficient to himself provided God is with him, tackling a new habitation. "Seigneur, êtes-vous content de moi?" he asks. The rainbow is his answer.

This artless little play, put together with an infinity of contrivance, moves with perfect poise on twin planes of amusement and emotion. In the beginning we are reminded of some round-game for children, primitive "Happy Families," let us say. But long before the end we know that we have been in touch with a mind which, having acquired all sophistication, has yet lost nothing of simplicity. As a work of art the thing is flawless and unique, or perhaps it would be more proper to say that I know nothing from which it can be derived. As a last impression let me suggest a poem by Blake acted by figures in a Gauguin canvas come to life and talking the everyday jargon of Paris. The playing throughout was superb, and in M. Auguste Bovério one respectfully salutes a very fine actor.

*Arts.*

*Wednesday, June 17, 1931.*

### "LE VIOL DE LUCRECE"

A Play. By André Obey

Presented by the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier

"Ce bon Brutus! Ça, tu sais, c'est un numéro!" says the first soldier, talking to-day's *argot*. Brutus is the quipster whose lips turn to bronze when at the end he promises the populace that the wild boar, Tarquin, is "for it," as we, in our lingo, would put it. "Pourquoi Tarquin fait-il cette gueule-là?" asks the second soldier. His comrade explains that Tarquin is "fed up," since a nobody like Collatin can be so richly married while he, a King's son, still lacks a wife. Note that in making his Roman soldiers talk like this, M. Obey merely repeats Shakespeare's trick

of making his Athenian workmen talk like the Warwickshire rustics of his own time. This is the only way in which to bring the past to life again; anything else is mummification.

Now the roysterers have left the tent of Collatin, the secure and happy husband, and sought their own. But Tarquin bids his groom saddle his horse, whose head he is to turn towards Rome. Now we see Lucrèce sewing among her maidens babbling like novices in to-day's convent, but so grouped and each assuming disposition of such loveliness that about and over them is the clarity of a thirteenth-century painting. But Lucrèce is more mysteriously attended. For here come the Reciter and Recitress, two half-masked figures who fulfil the triple rôle of Chorus, Messenger and Mouthpiece. Chorus interpreting the emotion of the scene is familiar, and Messenger is a little less than Greek in the sense that the messages brought concern not things too horrific for visual presentation, but merely matters not convenient to be seen. Yet even here the device is intensely dramatic, as when the Recitress verbalises the brooding scene:

Elle file. Comme tous les soirs, comme chaque soir,  
comme hier soir, Lucrèce file la laine au milieu de ses  
femmes—

and is capped by the Reciter's clamant picture not only of Tarquin's ravishing stride but of his horse's gallop:

Il est parti! Tarquin est parti! Le Seigneur Tarquin  
est parti! . . . Il galope! Comme il galope! Vous  
entendez? Entendez-vous les quatre fers de son cheval  
carillonner sur les pavés de la route romaine?

We see Lucrèce's chamber, empty save for the bed round which the curtains are drawn. The Reciter and Recitress have mounted pulpits on each side of the stage, as who should say Joel and the Erythræan Sybil on

Michael Angelo's ceiling. Now o'er this half of the world Nature seeming dead, the Woman who is Mouthpiece for Lucrece makes for us an image of her quiet slumber. She hears no more than the crooning of the doves; whereas the Man, alarum'd by Tarquin's sentinel, bids us hear the wolf. At last comes Tarquin, in the full light of the stage stealing along black corridors and fumbling at dark doors while the Reciter explains what he does and the emotions tearing his breast. He enters the chamber and draws aside the curtains of the bed. Here follows a scene of unmitigated grandeur, in which Tarquin confesses full knowledge of the colour of his deed and its consequences to their utmost ramification of remorse and shame. The last thing which should restrain him is his kingship, voiced by the Reciter crying four times in tones to wake the conscience of the dead: "Tarquin-roi! Roi des Romains! Roi! Roi!" But in vain.

The next act begins with the gentle chatter of the maidens going to attend their mistress's rising. This is followed by a long, but not too long, tableau of the distress of Lucrece, beautifully commented by the Recitress while the Reciter shocks us to further realisation with a vignette of Tarquin returning to camp, throwing himself off his horse, and boisterous with his "Bonjour, Collatin, tu as une mine superbe, haha! une mine de pape!" It is the Reciter who, as the crowd gathers to listen to Lucrece's avowal, puts the whole thing back in time:—

La grande Rome est en histoire. Athènes, jadis, à ses grandes heures, fut en beauté; Babylone, en amour; Troie, en alarmes. Un jour, Berlin sera en guerre et Paris, en révolution. Rome, aujourd'hui, est en histoire.

Collatin comes, and has his terrible:—"Tarquin est resté ici?" there being that in his tones which reveals the eternal Latin across whose mind the notion of his wife as drab is beginning to flit. Falteringly Lucrece tells her

story of the threat under which Tarquin forced her submission. But Collatin hardly listens, Lucrece despatches herself in the high Roman fashion, and the tragedy is complete. The last word is with Brutus, who declares that she whom Tarquin has violated is not only Lucrece but their common mother, Rome.

This magnificent and austere tragedy is perfectly staged and acted. Throughout the play the tones of M. Bovério's voice, ranging from organ bass to the shrill trumpet, are something which the English stage has not heard in my day. Adding this player's Reciter to his Noé, we are entitled, I think, to acclaim not only the fine but the great actor. Mlle. Suzanne Bing brings immense perception to the long and difficult rôle of the Recitress, while for the spiritual tenderness and beauty of Mlle. Marie-Hélène Dasté's Lucrece no praise can be too high. M. Jean Dasté gives to Collatin some of the glamour of old legend, the representatives of the flower-like maidens fulfil their tasks perfectly, and one should not overlook M. Jean Villard's sketch of a major-domo. Remains only the Tarquin of M. Aman Maistre, and of this good actor it shall be said that his portrait shows the firm drawing of an old master. These distinguished visitors are to move to-morrow to the Ambassadors Theatre for a short season, where it is to be hoped that not only the general public but our English actors will contrive to see them. Everything that the leaders do is a part of great acting, whilst the enunciation of the company's humblest member puts our mumblers to shame.

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*New.**Thursday afternoon, Feb. 4, 1932.*

## "BATAILLE DE LA MARNE"

La Compagnie des Quinze in a Play by  
André Obey

ON the stage nothing, save a few dun hangings veiling the bare theatre walls, and the floor artificially raked to enable the actors to move in different planes. Off the stage an immense distance away a military band is playing, and in the wings the armies of France go by. We see them through the eyes of five or six peasant women clothed in black and grouped as you may see them in the fields of France or the canvases of Millet.

Enter the Messenger wearing his *carrick* or coat with three capes. Strange combination, the wear of French coachmen and the symbol of French military genius. And now the events of August 1914 come to us through the Messenger, good and bad news being conveyed through the ringing and awed tones of his voice, through the blaze and darkening of his eye. The gay troops in their pre-war blue and red have reached Mulhouse. The houses of Altkirch are bright with flags that have not waved since 1870. An old peasant promises himself to renew old friendships at Strasbourg and make the journey on foot.

The calm is excessive. "Hist!" says the Messenger, lending an ear to that which is happening far away. "A check!" Brusquely he leaves the scene. The figure of France enters, and we see in Mlle. Dasté's aspect that France is anxious. The Messenger re-enters with tidings that the mind rejects—the news that a million German soldiers are on French soil—and his words are already a carillon of defeat: "Echec de la première et de la deuxième armées en Alsace! Echec des troisième et quatrième armées dans le Luxembourg belge! Echec de la cinquième armée sur la Sambre! Echec du corps expéditionnaire britannique à Mons! Echec sur toute la ligne!"

Women arrive from the invaded districts. In one village a gamekeeper has fired on the Germans, who, in reprisal, have shot the mayor. Here we find a pointer to this play's compression and momentum, since in a dozen words we receive the full impact of that, in other hands, full-length tragedy, "The Burgomaster of Stilemonde." Then a handful of soldiers drag themselves over the ground, destroyed by that fatigue in comparison with which defeat and victory are meaningless. Now the Messenger has that to impart which strikes France to the ground so that he must speak to her with bent head and as to the dying.

The Cathedral of Rheims has been bombarded. The images of the saints have been destroyed. Alone the statue of Joan of Arc. . . . But enough of portents. The enemy continues to advance and has passed St. Quentin. Why does the General hold his hand? He is well, has never been better. Rises at six, bed at ten. The mid-day meal at noon, dinner at eight, a little walk after dinner for the digestion, the sleep of a child. Round their chief the officers of the General Staff rage in nightmare impotence. He sleeps. Why? The tension increases. The soldiers who should defend Paris retreat and again retreat. The women taunt them and ask whether Marseilles will be far enough. France joins in the jeers and hurls at her children the unforgivable among insults:

Lâches! lâches! Eh! lâches! . . . Vous savez ce qu'ils disent de vous? Hein? Ce qu'ils écrivent de vous à leur famille? Oui, on a trouvé une lettre sur un prisonnier allemand—car mes troupes ont fait un prisonnier, ha! ha!—la lettre commence comme ça: "Cette fameuse armée française qui f . . . le camp . . ." Vous avez entendu! . . . Quoi? . . . Oh! je vous en prie! Ne vous gênez pas pour moi! . . . Rien, je vous dis. . . . Je ne vous demande rien. . . . Allez, hop! . . . F . . . le camp!

As the curtain falls on the first part a German soldier

takes the stage. Alone the Messenger has not lost hope, since high up in the sky he has heard the song of a lark.

In the second part the Messenger describes the General's stupor of contemplation before his maps, and how it has not been stupor. Then comes the finest thing in the play, a *récit* which will become famous in French literature. This is the story of the taxi-driver describing how he took to the front a corporal and four soldiers, a Limousin, a Morvandiau, a Tourangeau, and a Breton, who as they neared the lines began to sing each the song of his people. This is followed by something belonging to another loveliness.

France, sensing the new hope, bids her soldiers take new courage. Still in that summer the old men and women shall gather the grapes in vineyards which the soldiers of France will have protected. France smiles at an old woman filling that basket for which she, the embodiment of a country, forgets the local name. A soldier from the vine districts prompts her. France continues. The corn shall still be harvested and threshed, and from the farms will rise again that golden dust which is properly called . . . A soldier who has laboured at the harvesting prompts her.

And now the piece draws to an end. During their retreat the soldiers have continually advanced towards the footlights, and now, physically in the theatre, can go no further. "En avant!" cries France, and the superb right-about turn is the image which tells us that the Battle of the Marne has begun. The victorious Generals are saluted by name. Manoury! French! Foch! Sarraill! Castelnau! Joffre! One name is singled out for its mere beauty of sound. "Général Franchet d'Espérey! Vous dont le nom est beau comme une devise!" We recognise, in this apostrophe, unthinkable in any other language, the *panache* which is France, and see again the blue and gold of her statues to the Maid.

I seem to have read that this piece is not successful. I can only say that I saw nearly all of it through a mist,

and that I will never pronounce a piece unsuccessful which, as this play did on Thursday afternoon, reduces a whole audience to tears. Is it objected that the Gallic cock crows a little too loudly over a battle which was rather lost by the Germans than won by the French? Such considerations are the dull stuff of staff lectures at the Ecole Militaire; they do not concern the work of art which is this piece. Further, we who are English must remember that M. Obey is a Frenchman writing for a people whose spirit cannot be o'ercrowded. It is unnecessary to say how Mlle. Dasté limns France and how M. Bovério delivers her message. Hardly anything happens on the stage, yet owing to the astonishing talent of this dramatist aided by these two artists the play begins its significance where realism ends.

Mlle. Bing, in the tiny part of the mother of one of the soldiers, again reveals herself as one of the notable actresses of our time, and the whole cast plays with a perfection of understanding and a mastery of ensemble beyond praise. This is great, perhaps the greatest acting, since on a bare stage the actors recreate not the passion of one or two, but the agony of a nation.

## THE OLD PLAY

Covent Garden.

Thursday, July 9, 1931.

### "LA DAME AUX CAMELIAS"

Revival of the Play by Alexandre Dumas *filis*

THIS revival, coinciding with the first night of "Mrs. Fischer's War," might be characterised as Mme. Rubinstein's war. First in a series of engagements of which all but one were successful was the space-time victory. It is no mean feat to get any spoken play across that yawning gulf which is the well of Covent Garden orchestra when nobody is in it, and it must always be a considerable achievement even for the splurgiest of virtuoso actresses to galvanise the old *drame* into any semblance of life. How much greater the achievement, then, when one considers that Mme. Rubinstein is essentially not an actress but a dancer! It is only proper to say that I have not seen Mme. Rubinstein dance, and that I make my little statement without prejudice to the converse opinion. But the twofold victory was pulled off, the credit going in the first place to the extraordinarily handsome, elaborate and faithful scenery of M. Alexandre Benois. No modern nonsense about painting half a crazy sofa and the tipsy back of a chair on a bit of obvious canvas and saying that these daubs "express" a salon in the demi-monde of 1848. Here were the actual pieces or the cunningest reproductions of them. Here, too, was all that gilt and marble, ormolu and alabaster, which with the velvets made up a drawing-room to suit the age whose poets went about proclaiming that the visible world existed. The stage at Covent Garden is immense, too big even for a production designed to be carried round the opera-houses of the world, and so it came about that each of the five marvellous sets, designed

incidentally by an artist and not by a mere furniture dealer, was framed in crimson billows and scarlet eddies which might equally be the clouds of Heaven or the cornices of some Titan's palace. This betasselled grandeur admirably suited a drama whose heroines, to fit them for polite contemplation, must be given antique status—"dashing Cyprians," and all the rest of it—though any one of them will become *pauvre fille* the moment some dotard intends expostulation.

And then the lighting, subdued, discreet, and significant! Gone was our meaningless garish flood whereby the floor under tables and settees is as brilliantly lit as the banquets or leading ladies spread thereon. Each jet of gas within its opaque globe shed a radiance as well defined as that of a street-lamp on a foggy night. I shall say, in short, that these strictly representational facts were in every way as helpful to the imagination as the strictly non-representational hints of your modern Russians. This staging was a tremendous if undisputed victory for old-timers, since the new-timers, after one gasp, gave in.

Then the dresses! No wonder, if the Marguerite Gautiers of those days really wore such clothes, that the lawyer who is in every French family spent most of his time explaining to young blood that the definition of patrimony is not something to be squandered. The painter does not, or ought not to, live who could resist Mme. Rubinstein in any of her gowns, particularly the black one in the fourth act from whose imprisonment the actress's dazzling shoulders escaped to bathe in rivers of diamonds which it would be impertinent to call French. And then that ultimate bed-chamber, that mother-of-pearl sea with its swansdown wavelets into which this Venus must now decline! No man may describe such an apartment without hyperbole, and I permit myself to say that for its decoration Africa appeared to have been denuded of its ostriches, and Arctic and Antarctic of their bears.

No woman could have been ill in such a place, designed rather for a spectacular demise than for the ordinary

approaches thereto. No medicine bottle was apparent, and it is perhaps a criticism of this play that the doctor earns his money easily, since he tells Marguerite that recovery is certain and is not there when she does the other thing!

Then, again, the cast! Mme. Rubinstein deserves our thanks for assembling an admirable company. These are French actors from whom no secrets of the Dumasian theatre are hidden. One would particularly cite the enthusiasm of M. Maurice Donneaud's Armand, whose non-reticence your English *jeune premier* would shun as the plague. M. Armand Bour, who produced the play, a little underweighted Duval *père*, and he certainly created a small sensation by appearing in Marguerite's drawing-room with his hat in his hand. "Put your bonnet to his right use; 'tis for the head!" has always been the maxim for this sternest of parents, who, by custom immemorial, should only uncover himself when Marguerite properly reminds him that whatever she has become she is still a woman. Mme. Gina Barbieri made a very lively and probable Prudence, and the whole cast succeeded, in making us believe that this was the old play and not some modern joke at its expense.

And now, I suppose, the time has come to talk of Mme. Rubinstein, though one would rather not, since to fail to find her performance good is rather like objecting that a hostess who has entertained one royally is unwitty. Mme. Rubinstein imposes by her appearance; she is as tall as the men in her company, but looks taller, and moves through this play's troubled waters like some majestic liner indifferent to crest or trough. She has nothing that I should like to call facial expression, and even when she has contrived some approximation to emotion, it is within the next second as though nothing had happened. So a mountain after a passing cloud. Her most successful moments are those when she most faithfully reproduces Bernhardt's cadences and intonations; when she is not doing this she is doing nothing, for to this part she appears

to bring nothing of her own. Her death scene is easily the best, for here the playwright takes charge, and the actress has not yet existed who could beat Dumas *filis* when he really gets going. As against this estimate I willingly concede that Mme. Rubinstein obviously knows how Marguerite should be played, though she may not be able to manage it herself. She has dignity and a sense of period, moves well, and commits no accent or gesture out of the grand tradition. Indeed, anybody taking this to be a freshly imagined instead of a derivative performance would probably be able to wrest from it moments of satisfaction.



## MUCH CRY, LITTLE WOOL

*Embassy.*

*Sunday, September 6, 1931.*

### "THE MACROPULOS SECRET"

A Comedy. By Karel Capek

"I accept my threescore and ten years. If they are filled with usefulness, with justice, with mercy, with goodwill: if they are the lifetime of a soul that never loses its honour and a brain that never loses its eagerness, they are enough for me, because these things are infinite and eternal. . . ."  
—*Back to Methuselah, Part IV, Act II.*

THIS must, one thinks, always be an unsatisfactory play. But first let us give it full honours in respect of being a play of a good kind. "The Macropulos Secret" is not vulgar or tawdry or flippant or dull. It is not concerned with the mating of some intolerably modish young man with some tediously bright young woman. But these are negative virtues, and some of the merits of this piece are positive. It is made like a play, and so revives the interest in craftsmanship. It is charged with emotion and interest so that you can almost hear its author's brain humming, which is a very different thing from listening to the deep bourdon of the revolving stage, what time the playwright stands in the wings wondering which bit he shall shove on next. It deals with elemental things, dying and loving and being born, yesterday and the forever, the purpose of life, and whether at threescore and ten humanity should think it has had enough.

But still one deems the play unsatisfactory, and for this reason, that, after immensities of leading up, the thing led up to turns out to be almost nothing at all. Here it must be explained that the Macropulos Secret is a nostrum, monkey-glandish or otherwise, invented by a mediæval doctor, by virtue of which one Emilia Marty, an opera-singer born in sixteen hundred and something, is still

alive and looking as youthful and singing as well as ever. The age may not seem excessive for a prima donna, but we will let that pass. The diva, though she has exceeded the allotted span four times, is still afraid of dying; and, alas, she has mislaid the prescription for perpetual youth of which, apparently, one tablespoonful in water has to be taken once every three hundred years. She knows that the prescription is with the papers of that one of her lovers who died some hundred and fifty years ago, and whose succession is still in dispute and providing the Czecho-Slovakian courts with that Jarndyce case which is the prerogative and titbit of the legal profession in every country. This knowledge makes her intervene in the lawsuit, and for a good third of the play we watch the conflict between her efforts to keep her secret and the getting warmer, as the children say, of the lawyers.

Another third is devoted to Marty's relationships with the men around her in the present—the boy whom she would mother and who kills himself for love of her, his father to whom she sells herself for possession of the prescription, the lover of her last incarnation but one, now a nonagenarian and gaga. These things are brilliantly done, but at the end of them the play has only allayed curiosity without satisfying the mind. The secret being out we want to know what Marty has to say about it. And she has no more to impart than that she is very tired, very bored, and has definitely accepted Gus Elen's philosophy that the good of "anyfink" and therefore "everyfink" is "nuffink." Counsels of perfection are vain, and before complaining that a tricentenarian has not edified us with her views one should perhaps make sure that edification is possible.

It would be stupid to ask what words our own Mr. Shaw would have breathed into this old lady, because we know already. Mr. Shaw's maiden, while still in her maidenhood, discounted the pleasures of the dance, music, architecture, poetry, eating, drinking, sleeping, and even being dressed in the latest mode; she saw that in hundreds of years refuge would have to be taken in world-mending.

But Marty's boredom is the end of Marty; there is nothing more "to" her. Mr. Shaw's Ancient had become blind, but even he could say to the youth: "Infant: one moment of the ecstasy of life as we live it would strike you dead!" Marty knows nothing about ecstasy. You draw blank with her equally as to the old as to the new, for she has nothing to say either about Remembrance of Things Past or about fullness of days. She is as remote from Proust as from the Psalmist.

One feels, too, that there is something wholly illogical and arbitrary about the limitations of the Macropulos boon. There is a school of petty thinking which would discourage wealth on the grounds that poverty with health is better. But why must wealth in these arguments always figure as a cripple? Why should not that mediæval nostrum have invigorated the diva's mind as well as her body? Mr. Shaw saw the necessity for this when he gave his Ancient ecstasy. Obviously a human being whose capacity for being interested is what we should expect at three hundred can have nothing to say about life except that it is unbearable, and one feels that the pronouncement is not worth sitting in a theatre for close on three hours to hear.

As, philosophically speaking, there is no more in the play than this, it seems a pity that the diva who in the last act is always dodging behind curtains to change her dress or take a headache-powder should not finally emerge looking three hundred years old like Gagool in "King Solomon's Mines," or one of those crones who at fashionable night-clubs still incredibly take the floor. The play then might have that interest on the melodramatic level which it misses on the philosophic. There are some brilliant things in it, and one feels that if one or both the Capeks would stop bothering about automatic, entomological and pharmaceutical life and leave playwriting about robots, insects and living corpses in favour of human beings—one feels that such a play would be worth going a long way to see. But to urge this upon them is

probably as vain as inviting Pirandello to divorce himself from relativity. These things are like Mr. and Mrs. Micawber; there is no separating them. But that is no reason why we should not stick to the opinion hereinbefore expressed, that "The Macropulos Secret" is an unsatisfactory play.

As something to act, however, it must always be wholly satisfactory. The part of the diva, that sphinx without a secret, is laid out to show off a great actress, and woe betide us and the play if something of the sort is not present! I shall say bluntly that Miss Edith Sharpe is the stuff of which great actresses are made, and, given the theatre and the play and the happy conjunction of the essential auspices, is a great actress in her own right. What I mean is that if ever Time can bring again that May evening in the 'nineties, a fashionable theatre and a leading dramatist leaping to his greatest creation, if ever there is another Paula Tanqueray to be played, here is the actress. Miss Sharpe has looks and presence, pose and repose; she can wear frocks and stand out from the hurly-burly of a company; she has mystery, imagination and excitement. Her technique is unimpeachable. Whether she has passion and pathos I cannot say, because this part does not call forth these qualities. But she convinced me that, given the place and time and the rôle, she is your real leading-lady. Only she must change her name, say, to Eleonora Scapa. Interest is not stimulated by Sharpe; it might with Scapa flow.

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## OBJECTIONS OVER-RULED

*Drury Lane.*

*Tuesday, October 13, 1931.*

### "CAVALCADE"

By Noel Coward

CHELSEA and Bloomsbury, foregathering in the foyer, made no secret of the fact that this production had not their approval. Stage-pictures, they said, did not make a play; there was no wit, and such stirring of the emotions as they detected was obviously vulgar. A rude answer would be to laugh, but I shall choose the patient method and ask the highbrows to consider how far Mr. Coward achieved that which he intended and not something else that they would have preferred and he did not attempt. What did Mr. Coward set out to do? Make a present of a *Commedia dell'Arte* theme to some four hundred extemporising mummers? No! Sponsor a mime-ballet with spoken interludes, an entertainment à la Diaghilev cum Berners cum a few chosen Noelisms? No! Turn "Post Mortem" into a musical comedy? Again, no! Mr. Coward's job was to bethink him of Drury Lane Theatre, the old autumn melodrama, "Rose Marie," "The Land of Smiles," and find a successor *in that line*, for if it was not in that line there could be no hope of filling Drury Lane, which holds 2,600 people, nine times a week, for fifty-two weeks. This amounts to close on a million and a-quarter of people, and if Chelsea and Bloomsbury have a better play which they think can draw this audience will they please stop grumbling and trot it out?

Mr. Coward had the happy idea of presenting as drama to the eye the principal events of the last thirty years. But since Drury Lane stage does not revolve, he was compelled, while the big scenes were being set, to have little

front scenes of a narrative value. Now what sort of narrative could possibly connect national events throughout thirty years? Obviously a family which, *ex hypothesi*, shall take a part in each event as it comes along. This being so, it is absurd to complain of the coincidence which presents the Marryot family as being at the hub of every happening. Mr. Coward's thread is thin, but so is the string which holds a number of beads together, and this play consists, and is intended to consist, of a number of highly-coloured beads strung together. Mr. Coward is not a conspicuously bungling technician, and it may be supposed that if he had intended to present a Marryot Saga he could and would have made his string stronger. Only then, of course, there wouldn't be room for the beads, the play wouldn't be happening at Drury Lane, and he would not be doing the job with which he was entrusted.

The worst of the hyper-æsthetes is that give them an inch and they want to know why they have not been given the whole ell. Mr. Coward has given Chelsea and Bloomsbury one or two scenes for their peculiar satisfaction. There is Church Parade on the Sunday after Queen Victoria's funeral, a scene in dumb show admirably low in tone. There is the funeral which passes out of sight while we see its effect on the Marryot family. There is another scene in, which enlistment is decked out with a rewarding and faintly erotic romanticism—"On Monday I Walk out with a Soldier," "Military Mary," and so forth. This is followed by a vision of the departing armies, by bad news, and the recital of the same songs in the accents of horrified realisation. All these things are first-class because they are not underlined and because Mr. Coward is writing here for a section of his audience which can take a thing in. But the gallery at Drury Lane is a long way off, and subtlety runs the risk of becoming mere ineffectiveness. A precious Strachey-esque account of the last thirty years would be one good thing; bound volumes of the illustrated papers of the period are another. And it is the second sort of good thing which Mr. Coward has

achieved with something like genius. If the charge that the emotions are vulgarly stirred means that the appeal is couched in a way which simple folk will understand, I agree.

The scenes which aroused the greatest excitement, and over which one's recollection lingers longest are Mafeking Night at the theatre, Petticoat Lane, the front at Brighton with the band playing "The Gondoliers" and the crowd startled by what must surely be Blériot's monoplane, a picture of Waterloo Station during the tragic years, and last, Armistice Night in Trafalgar Square. "I hope," said Mr. Coward at the end, "that this play has made us feel that despite our national troubles it is still a pretty exciting thing to be English." That, in a nutshell, is his play. Miss Mary Clare, sustaining the chief part of Mrs. Marryot, fills it with deep womanliness and gives it the value of her own personal dignity. At the beginning she looks like a Renoir, and as the play proceeds she ages in the fearless old fashion while Miss Irene Browne, also acting brilliantly, rejuvenates in the fearless new.

Miss Una O'Connor, as the maidservant to whom Time and the war bring sables, provides another dazzling commentary, and one should on no account overlook the fun provided by Miss Strella Wilson as a musical-comedy heroine. The men have not much opportunity, and Mr. Fred Groves is easily the best. Here and there are one or two tiny faults, for instance an anachronistic use of the word "gesture" and a honeymooning young lady who looks as bridal as Matthew Arnold. But I shall not dwell upon occasional and minute blemishes, preferring to insist upon the beauty of Mrs. Calthrop's scenery and dresses and the unparalleled virtuosity of those stage pictures which are this play's merit. I enjoyed every moment of it, and propose with Mr. Cochran's leave to be present at the hundredth night, the two-hundredth, and so *ad infinitum*.

## LOST LOVELINESS

*Westminster.*

*Monday Afternoon, Nov. 23, 1931.*

### "THE UNQUIET SPIRIT"

A Play. By Jean-Jacques Bernard

Translated by John Leslie Frith

ADEQUATELY acted, this play is one of the most beautiful that the theatre has given us in the last fifty years. It is concerned on the material plane with a questing woman and a discontented man. Marceline has had several love-affairs, none of which has satisfied her, since she pitched illusion too high, and reality can never come up to the illusory. Out of ennui, for want of something better, or for safety's sake, she has married Philip, as kind as he is unimaginative, taking to him as a traveller buffeted in Alpine storms will take to a rest house. But this satisfaction is also illusory. For Marceline has cravings like those of the drug-taker deprived of his drug, except that they are emotional and proceed from some unknown yet necessary source. If this were a sentimental play our difficulty as playgoers would be less. One would recognise that Marceline has leapt too early and is looking too late, and that the rest of the piece could only be a transposition into the feminine key of Romeo's difficulty if he had married Rosaline before becoming aware of Juliet.

But M. Jean-Jacques Bernard has much subtler and more difficult fish to fry. Already he has given us a hint of his drama's strange complexity by making Marceline, who is on her way to Biarritz with her husband, insist on breaking their journey at St. Jean de Luz for a reason which is as irresistible as it is inexplicable. There is nothing of the minx about Marceline; she just does not know the



nature or the cause of her compulsion. Her brother Robert detects her unhappiness, and knows, too, that Philip is not, in the phrase of the Victorian writer for schoolgirls, Mr. Right. Every complete soul, he tells her, is half male and half female, and one half must ever wander through the world till it finds its twin, which, living in Patagonia, may be separated in Space, or, not being born, may, as Maeterlinck suggests in "The Blue Bird," be separated in Time. We feel that the boy has not cited his best authority, which is Schopenhauer in "Metaphysics of Love":

As a matter of fact, love determines nothing less than the establishment of the next generation. The existence and nature of the dramatis personæ who come on to the scene when we have made our exit have been determined by some frivolous love-affair.

The real aim of the whole of love's romance, although the persons concerned are unconscious of the fact, is that a particular being may come into the world; and the way and manner in which it is accomplished is a secondary consideration. However much those of lofty sentiments, and especially those in love, may refute the gross realism of my argument, they are nevertheless in the wrong.

Only, of course, the love-affair is not frivolous to those taking part in it. It is not frivolous to Marceline, who in the same breath bids her husband hold her closer and asks if there is not somebody else in the room. There is, but it is only a very ordinary hotel-guest turning over magazines on a table.

Once again and in the second act Marceline meets this hotel-guest in a public garden in Paris. She is sitting on one form, and he, who has been a bank-clerk and is dropping in the social scale, is sitting on another and giving her *congé* to the girl who has been his mistress. The third act begins some years later with an explanation by Philip to Robert of his sister's strange malady which

keeps them apart though they still live together. Then Marceline enters and repeats the request to be taken in her husband's arms which she made when, in the first act, she sensed some other presence. She is near hysteria, and in a long outburst relates how she has been compelled to sit outside prisons and hospitals without reason, and how equally without reason she has been able to abandon her vigils. And, of course, we realise that these have coincided with the hotel-guest's incarcerations and liberations. During this recital we have seen the figure of the unknown, now reduced to penury, creep past the house, and we know that it is his proximity which has brought on Marceline's hysteria. He leans against the door which Marceline bids her husband open, and falls dead. The curtain descends, and Marceline with the cry of "Starved!" presents us with the key to the whole drama.

Whether the piece is a part of beauty or belongs to the higher tomfoolery must depend entirely upon the way in which Marceline is acted. Miss Gillian Scaife's difficulties are that physically she does not suggest the woman postulated, and that her technical means are insufficient. The late Clare Eames, in her beautiful and memorable performance for the Stage Society three years ago, was largely helped by a personality which suggested the unrest occasioned by a soul too eager for the body. Here, one felt, was the kind of woman likely to be subject to a stress as unusual as that postulated in the play. In Clare Eames's case the nerves were, so to speak, too near the surface of the body. Miss Scaife gives the contrary impression, that of reposeful domesticity, and one's immediate and continuing impression of her Marceline is that she is not a subject for the influences, quarter spiritual, quarter psychic, quarter physical, and quarter goodness-knows-what that M. Bernard indicates.

Now the actress who plays Marceline has to accomplish everything there is in the play before she is given the words with which to tackle it. When Clare Eames played the scene in the Paris garden she expressed in her face, and

even in her body, all we were afterwards to know of Marceline, so that we believed the husband's account of his wife's vagaries and her confession of them because the actress had already convinced us that here was the woman capable of them. Miss Scaife does nothing with this scene any more than she makes anything of that first encounter with and amazed recoil from the stranger, in which her predecessor, by some miracle of suggestion, foretold the play. In addition Miss Scaife's enunciation makes it difficult for us to hear her. Mr. Kynaston Reeves repeats his sensitive performance of the husband, and as the brother Mr. Denys Blakelock is, as usual, enormously intelligent. In the part of the stranger, so well played by Mr. George Zucco, Mr. Richard Southern startles by an accent which if it be art makes him the finest character-actor of the day, but which, if it be not art, he should get rid of at the earliest opportunity.

I regret to have to say ungrateful things about this indifferent presentation of an exquisite piece. I infinitely prefer to laud the management's perception that this is an exquisite piece which ought to be put on.

## BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER MAKE GOOD

*Old Vic.*

*Monday, January 4, 1932.*

### "THE KNIGHT OF THE BURNING PESTLE"

Revival of Beaumont and Fletcher's Comedy

THOUGH Mr. Kipling does not say so, there must be as many ways of listening to tribal lays as of writing them. So many listeners so many pairs of ears. The other night at the Old Vic. one found oneself enjoying this enchanting old piece in half-a-dozen ways. One began by taking it as the good-natured, easy thing it is, a panorama of the joy of being alive, shot here and there with something of that beauty and pain which plagued every Elizabethan. This brought one back to the sense of period and set one, as these old plays always do, to the making out of a profit and loss account. What do we lose? Well, not to be too pedantic or exhaustive, we lose something of what might be called correspondency. Our wealthy grocers and their ladies still patronise art and artists, though not in the simple way of this play's *Citizen and Wife*.

We still must launch into the world our young fortune-seekers whom we call go-getters. But with care and art and insinuation, and not after Merrythought's way of counting ten shillings into Jasper's hand and singing him down the wind. And what of Merrythought himself, the unrepentant spendthrift reduced to forty shillings but who has never yet come into his dining-room without finding excellent meat and drink o' the table, or worn out a suit without prevailing on his tailor for a new one? "Without question it will be so ever; use makes perfectness. If all should fail, it is but a little straining myself extraordinary, and laugh myself to death."

Perhaps the economic sense is sharper than it was; we do not look so kindly upon Harold Skimpole. But then Skimpole could not have said: "All I have to do in this world is to be merry; which I shall, if the ground be not taken from me; and if it be, (*Sings*)

When earth and seas from me are reft,  
The skies aloft for me are left."

Then, too, just as Beaumont and Fletcher's audience must have recognised their characters as skits upon familiar types, so the whole play must have been a burlesque of the romances of the period. Perhaps that is the reason why when the play was first produced it was a complete failure, for if human nature does not change, neither do theatre audiences, and we know that even to-day no burlesque succeeds which is at the expense of that to which the public is genuinely if sentimentally attached. As the seventeenth century advanced the taste for sixteenth-century romances presumably declined, whence one would expect a burlesque of them to become more popular; in any case, it is significant that Beaumont and Fletcher's play, which failed in 1611, was a great success in 1635.

We lose the immediate sense of Michael's: "Is not all the world Mile End, mother?" and his mother's reply: "No, Michael, not all the world, boy; but I can assure thee, Michael, Mile End is a goodly matter." We lose, too, the contemporary excitement of hearing Ralph spout:

By Heavens, methinks, it were an easy leap  
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon——

and the immediate joy of detecting that he goes on to misquote and make a mess of a passage from a current masterpiece. But that is enough of our losses. What we gain is what Henry James, talking of old pictures, called "the tone of time." Perhaps no old masters looked in their own day as lovely as they do in ours; an unintended mellowness has come upon them. But there is more in it than this, for we look upon old beauty by the light of newer

lamps, and it is difficult to believe that late Elizabethans saw in this piece the naïveté that we do.

Sitting at the piece the other night I found myself wondering whether our attitude to the stage has not changed more greatly than we suspect. May not the Elizabethans have regarded a play as something beginning and ending with its performance? To-day we regard "Hamlet" as something existing, so to speak, outside Shakespeare's page; so definitely are we persuaded of this that we indulge in theories and speculations about the character apart from Shakespeare's words. Hamlet and his world have become so real to us that any stage presentation of the play is only a *translation* of that world to the boards instead of being the whole of it.

That sense was completely absent the other night. At the end of Beaumont's play the Citizen says: "Come, Nell, shall we go? The play's done." Whereas leaving "Hamlet" we do not feel that the play is done any more than we have recognised it as beginning. For "Hamlet" continues always in our consciousness, and when we think of it it is in connection with some *real* Elsinore and not a stage setting.

One asked oneself, too, exactly how impressionable were late Elizabethan and early Jacobean audiences, and whether the discarding of the platform stage and the substitution of the picture frame has not increased impressionableness. When Ralph cannot pay his reckoning at the inn the Citizen jumps on to the stage and produces the money, and when Michael has chilblains the Citizen's Wife is extremely forthcoming as to their cure. But the actors who are performing for the benefit of the Citizen and his Wife do not seem particularly put out by the interruptions which go on throughout the play. In fact, they *are* the play, for Ralph, the grocer's apprentice who clambers over the footlights, turns himself into the play's hero, again without incommoding the company.

When in the old melodrama the sailor leaped on to the

stage it was because he was over-convinced by what G. H. Lewes called the *optique du théâtre*. One wonders how much of the *optique du théâtre* existed in Beaumont and Fletcher's day. I was persuaded the other night of one of two things. Either this piece is the most sophisticated, Pirandellish thing that ever existed, since Citizen, Wife, and Apprentice are three "characters," in the Dickensian sense, in search of a play, in which case the audience of the time must have been highly sophisticated. Or else it was always a wild farrago of reasonless absurdity which might well have been called "It's a Grocer!"

With the blazing exception of Miss Thorndike and the careful one of Mr. George Zucco the piece is not too well acted. To the part of the Wife Miss Thorndike brings all that warm-heartedness which she has at command equally with Greek austerity. She has often felt the need, in Rachel's phrase, to "dis-enduchess" herself, and she seizes the occasion with gusto even to the importation of a Lancashire accent. As the Citizen, Mr. Zucco, free from the trammels of blank verse, gives a more than agreeable performance.

But surely Mr. Richardson is miscast? His stolid, inexpressive mien, altogether admirable in Bottom and in all delineations of the downright, and his general suggestion of the tongue-tied do not belong to the volatile, mercurial Apprentice who has been an amateur actor and spills the loquacity of which he is full. Histronics should tumble out of Ralph because he cannot help it, and to invite Mr. Richardson to this is like asking a stonewaller to play one of Macartney's innings. Mr. Richard Ainley was this company's actor for the part, but he is young and his turn is not yet.

A still more unfortunate piece of casting was the choice of Mr. Frank M. Clark to play Merrythought, for Merrythought has innumerable snatches to troll, and Mr. Clark has no voice to troll with. Nor, I submit, should the part be made so wholly pantaloon, for the merriment is that of the round and not the shrunken belly. Mr. Robert Harris

speaks Jasper's lines beautifully, and delightful music is discoursed throughout. Mr. Harcourt Williams, the producer, knows better than I do whether the autograph fiend existed in those days, and whether popular actors could write. The play's reception was most enthusiastic.



## HELEN IN THE STRAND

*Adelphi.*

*Saturday, January 30, 1932.*

### "HELEN!"

An Opera Bouffe. Based on "La Belle Hélène" by Meilhac and Halévy. English Adaptation by A. P. Herbert. Music by Offenbach, arranged by E. W. Korngold

HELEN, thy beauty has meant all sorts of things to all sorts of writers! It has inspired the full orchestra of world-poets booming and banging and sawing away in what Mr. Robey has called "the halls of classic consonance." It has also served as peg for two French vaudevillists and a German melodist driving an honest trade in quips and tunes. The glory that was Greece? "Quelle blague!" we can imagine Meilhac saying to Halévy, and Halévy agreeing.

Though the second and wittier of the collaborators died less than fifteen years ago, few playgoers can have any recollection of the first night of the famous operette. But we can be sure of this: that Helen's time and place were definitely the 'fifties and some bandbox theatre of the boulevards—was it perhaps the Bouffes Parisiens in the Passage Choiseul?—while that which drew the applause of the now soundless clapping host was all that the librettists and their confrère could pack into the piece of French wit, French verve, French bedazzlement, and music so French that it needed a German Jew to write it. We may be sure that the heels of Helen's French shoes were as high as Ilium's towers were topless.

Mr. Cochran's problem was to furbish up the old sparkle and avoid substituting a new one, to stick to the operette and to keep the thing French. Who should do it for him? In the matter of libretto Meilhac and Halévy's

day was obviously over; what about Mr. A. P. Herbert, the most English of our wits? But French poetry, even when it is grave, presents the English interpreter with difficulties; France's tragic dramatists are Restoration before the Monarchy has fallen.

Those repetitioners, Racine and Corneille, indulge in terrific mouthings about lovers slain by passion when to the English mind "smitten" would put the case high enough: French opera-bouffe is a transposition into the key of mischief of something which, for all the noise it makes, has never, to the English sense, been really serious. Hence a French operette about Helen and Paris, Menelaus, Agamemnon, Nestor and all the Alexandrine crowd can only be parody at two removes, and how exactly Mr. Herbert has realised this is shown in the little verse in which the contending armies agree on the pragmatical if not the moral issue:

No wife will take  
Young men to bed  
If when they wake  
They find they're dead.

Mr. Herbert is reasonably witty throughout. To be honest, I ought to say that whenever the ear is not listening to the buzz and *frou-frou* of Mr. Oliver Messel's marvellous colourings, or desists from accompanying the composer on some haunting excursion, when the eye can momentarily forget Herr Reinhardt's marshallings and M. Massine's deployings, and shut out that inventory of beauty which is Miss Evelyn Laye—what I am getting at is that when the mind has a moment free for Mr. Herbert it always finds him bright. One says boldly that no other adapter could have been wittier after that event of eighty years ago.

Perhaps one could not expect Mr. Herbert to maintain throughout the level of his best lyric, which begins: "Is *that* the face that launched a thousand ships?" and then picks Homer's brains. But this is legitimate in one whose private thunder is good enough, and I shall quote in

support Mercury's warning to Paris before the Judgment: "You will see three turtle-doves when you begin the business, and two hell-cats when you've done." But the fate of every librettist is to take the kicks whilst composer, producer, wardrobe-mistress, electrician, call-boy and even the actors get the kudos, which I take to be the Greek for ha'pence. Let it be recorded that the new third act, which ascends the brightest heaven of Mr. Cochran's invention, is Mr. Herbert's own.

Professor Korngold is not going to be blamed by me because he has done for Offenbach what Mozart did for Handel. Thanks to musical comedy the theatre ear is grosser than it was; Professor Korngold, compelled to augment the score to the size of the theatre and scale of production, has given volume to delicacy without encroaching on it. And how fresh, in these brazen days, is Offenbach's pure lilt! This brings me to the production, and I shall not offend if I say that Herr Reinhardt is one of the best actors in the piece. It is incomprehensible that he should have restored and redecorated and re-enacted the old thing, and made a colossal show of it without losing one jot of its boudoir, jewel-case charm.

But we must remember that Herr Reinhardt has had his henchmen, kittle cattle among whom to attempt discrimination. Let the Orgy—which will be the dream of London as it must have been the nightmare of the Censor—be put down to the credit of M. Massine, since this leaves one free to say that Mr. Messel's decorations are a triumph of wit, fantasy and ravishment. "The centuries kiss and commingle," and so do these centurions wearing the costumes of old Troy as if they were the courtiers of Louis Quatorze. The battle scene is something which old Poussin might have designed for the walls of a modern night club. Those amazing white plumes splashed with red may be baroque; I prefer to say that they look as though Jupiter's nose has bled. If this show is not Mr. Messel's, whose is it?

Miss Laye's porcelain quality is known the world over,

and the blue of her eyelids and trailing robe is pure Wedgwood. Now to Naiad airs she brings competence in the hard business of acting. Her singing is the nearest possible approach to the real thing; her breathing of "Shepherd, have done" comes o'er us like the sweet south, stealing and giving odour. Mr. Bruce Carfax will never again be so well served by a rôle as he is in the case of Paris, nor will he better fulfil any future rôle. His eyes, slanting up into his head, give him a faun-like quality happily equidistant from Russian dancer and Oxford blue, and this permits him to look like a love-god and abjure mawkishness. In addition Mr. Carfax acts and sings as well as we would have him.

As Menelaus, Mr. Robey is the cynosure of every eye off the stage though on the stage nobody marks him, whence it will be realised that his performance is a miracle of accommodation like that of a trombone-player obliging with a pianissimo. The old-time roars have taken on a sucking-dove quality, and Robeyism, here more honoured in the breach than in the observance, is now an overtone. The gorgeous rhetoric of the halls has been subdued to the poet's "Nicean barks," and the performance is irresistibly comic throughout. As Calchas, Mr. W. H. Berry achieves a feat similar to Mr. Robey's. His part, if not very long, is very good, and I do not think a better artist could have been chosen for it. Mr. Berry is alive throughout.

The tiny part of the Messenger is perfectly played by Mr. Hay Petrie, which may suggest to our Dull Young Things that Shakespeare is still something if only as a training-ground! Mention must be made of Mr. Leslie Jones's Agamemnon, Miss Désirée Ellinger's Orestes, and the remarkable convolutions of Eve. The chorus has an enormous rôle; whether rapt and static or orgifying and corybantic, it acts as one person. The casting throughout has been a feat of jugglery combined with vision, a masterpiece of, shall I say, sleight-of-mind.

Mr. Cochran's share in all this? I take it to have been

that of the connoisseur in beauty as distinct from spectacle, of the onlooker who has seen most of the game: Sole arbiter among many claimants to our attention, he has been utterly purposed that none shall be heard more than the others. Determined, too, that the production shall prevail as a work of art, a whole greater than its parts and standing up to their sum. In this latest and finest example of his superb taste Mr. Cochran has recognised old tradition and discovered new glamour.

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## CART BEFORE HORSE

*Lyric, Hammersmith.*

*Wednesday, February 24, 1932.*

### "DERBY DAY"

A Comic Opera. By A. P. Herbert. Music by  
Alfred Reynolds

THE critic at Hammersmith is in the hideous case of one who is asked by his hostess what he thinks of her country-house theatricals. There are so many consideroatins which, strictly, have nothing to do with the play, each of them, it may be, a flower of remembrance, of gratitude, gallantry's recognition, or any one of the hundred things for which Sir Nigel Playfair and his Hammersmith venture are famed.

On Wednesday night last there was a whole bouquet of these odorifera. First there was Mr. Herbert, who, nervously fingering his tie, modestly breathed, where he should have blown, the fanfare of his prologue. Now, how can one say of an author from whose adjacent and hospitable roof half the audience applauds its annual Boat Race that their host mumbles where an actor would declaim? Is the sensitive reader jarred by the personal note? Let him be assured that to touch it equally irks the critic. But the personal *is* the note of these intimate performances.

How, again, shall one say of Mr. Reynolds, who in the past has borne the brunt of so much melodic resuscitation, that after three hours of striving he has not produced a single tune which the commonalty will recognise as such? How gracefully get round the fact that the voice of our remembered favourite, Mr. Frederick Austin, is not what it was? How, finally, may a conscientious critic preserve his integrity when the massed intelligentsia of London comes up to him even in the first interval and instructs him that such ravishment has not been before? Must he

out of pusillanimity, which is better spelled funk, temper criticism to admired intention, or shall he nerve himself to apply the standards he would use if the play were neutrally exposed, say in Poplar, and before an audience mindless of the Hammersmith legend?

The first thing to be said is that the enthusiasm of the audience was extraordinary, the people who knew about music vying with each other in praise of Mr. Herbert's wit, and the literary people being equally boisterous as to Mr. Reynolds's score. The musicians had the better end of the stick here, since of the book's satirical excellence there can be no manner of doubt, no possible doubt whatever. Mr. Herbert's libretto teems with witty lines, though we may wonder whether his Muse has the one quality by which a master-librettist declares himself, that *jingle* which awakes and compels a corresponding lilt in the music.

But there is more to it than this. Gilbert wrote his lyrics *for music* and put his point where his colleague could see it, whereas Mr. Herbert's wit is diffuse and things are happening in the words before the accompanying strain has time to get going. In "Derby Day" the collaborators are constantly pulling away from each other. Thus when Mr. Herbert mentions closing time at the pub Mr. Reynolds responds with a phrase worthy of "The Immortal Hour." The heroine, looking forward to the day when a merry maiden marries, finds her anticipations clothed in the rarefied atmosphere of that arabesque by Debussy whose line the music follows. "Come with me to church," says some gay spark, and the music is as plaintive as though it were the dirge for Bredon's young woman who went to church alone.

Mr. Reynolds has been praised for not getting into Mr. Herbert's way, which is like attributing to the leader of a tandem no other office than that of not obstructing his wheeler. Whereas, as all good whips know, both animals should be of equal mettle, and the madcappery divided. Mr. Reynolds has his fling here and there, and it is then that we become most conscious of that synthetic

music-making which is the worst kind of tunefulness, the near-melody which is never quite a tune. Mr. Reynolds gives his barmaid a love-song, and there ain't no barmaid living in the land who could cope with what to her must be musical double-Dutch.

Our composer is a most accomplished musician, and his score is admirable, and we keep telling ourselves how admirable and musicianly it is. When, for example, Mr. Herbert baits the Licensing Justices we note how Mr. Reynolds's score takes on the colour used by Strauss in "Heldenleben" to poke fun at his enemies. But Sullivan didn't require to be so scholarly, and neither did Leslie Stuart, nor Lionel Monckton, nor Sidney Jones, nor Gustav Kerker writing those tunes in "The Belle of New York" which to-day's butcher-boy, never having heard the opera, still whistles. Or you might say that while "Brigg Fair" is a masterpiece, for the purposes of comic opera about a fairground the composer of "Oh dear, what can the matter be?" is to be preferred to the greater master.

But there is another reason why the music should lead—the fact that it has always led. A tuneful and witty score has saved a dull plot and a witless book time and time again; there is no instance of the opera that has not caught the ear being kept alive through wit in the libretto. That the Hammersmith management grievously misunderstands all this is proved by the programme which prints Mr. Herbert's name in big letters and that of Mr. Reynolds in small. These things being so the judgment of the music must also come first, theoretically and also for a highly practical reason. It is a common thing for intellectuals to be tone-deaf, and since to them any tune is no tune, all are equally good. Hence one would expect to find "Derby Day" acclaimed as a dual masterpiece by literati, Senior Wranglers, metaphysicians and anybody else who cannot tell "Yankee Doodle" from "Land of Hope and Glory." It was so acclaimed. But the public being more music-minded than grey-mattered, the test of this as of every comic opera must be not cerebration, but ear-



tickling. In my view "Derby Day" does not pass this test.

But it comes with flying colours through all the other tests. Mr. Herbert has been praised, and I shall only say that if there is a flaw in his wit, it is that he allows Haddock to monopolise too much of it and to tie him at the end into a knot which there is no untying.

It wasn't beer that made me do it—  
It was your blasted horses!

sings Rose, forced to give some reason for petty thieving. Then Bert the tipster must sing:

Every time your 'orses start  
'Arf the country breaks its 'eart:  
The other 'arf they comes in 'ere  
And stands the other 'arf a beer.

But we understood the opera to be *in praise* of the horse, since did not the Prologue say:

For the brave beast would whisper if he could:  
"We may be going, but, by God, we're good!"

No, "blasted horses" is a mistake, for which Haddock is responsible. Mr. Herbert is much better when he attunes himself to pure fun and makes delicate ladies aver that "the favourite is sweating," or the bold, too-good Baronet apostrophise his entry: "Beloved horse, attend, I pray; the Derby will be run to-day!"

Was it not Stevenson who complained of his heroine's trick of growing ugly and his inability to prevent it? Despite one's best endeavour, this notice, which was intended to be almost wholly laudatory, has insisted upon running in the opposite direction. Let me now strongly, if belatedly, insist that there is an immense amount in this show to be mightily enjoyed. There is Mr. Sheringham's scene-setting—at the Old Black Horse, on the road to Epsom, in the stables, on the rails, and back again at the pub—which never vies with "Cavalcade" and keeps to the medium of the intimate theatre. There are the immensely high spirits of a very hard-working company, all of whom act reasonably well and some better. Miss Tessa

Deane, who plays the heroine, has a charming voice which she has learned to use, and quite a notion of acting. That great wireless favourite, Miss Mabel Constanduros, as a tipster's mother, gains by being seen as well as heard. Is it possible that as the tempestuously teetotal Lady Waters, Miss Mabel Sealby is nearer to satiric than to dramatic truth? In comic opera all the parts which are not heroic must be comic to the eye, and therefore Lady Waters should, like the Lady Jane, belong to the outsize, in Nature as well as in opinion. Now since Miss Sealby is the nattiest actress the stage affords the part cannot be hers, though she provides miniature delight in plenty. The audience acclaimed, and rightly, Mr. Scott Russell's innkeeper.

But the best acting, *qua* acting, comes from Mr. Leslie French. It is hard lines that your versatile player cannot proclaim versatility, since the spectator who is unaware of this quality in its possessor values him no more than he does the one-part actor or mere self-exponent. Mr. French got as near a declaration as he could when he shyly, and I hope slyly, thanked Providence and Sir Nigel for presenting him this side of the water also, whereby some of us took to remembering him as Puck and Poin and Verges and Feste and the Fool in "Lear." It cannot be thought that these are all one part or that a player who has brilliantly embodied them in any way resembles a tipster on the Downs. Let me admit that Mr. French's Bert Bones, being something too genteel, is not so photographic a performance as might have been given by some non-Shakespearean, musical-comedy buffoon. It is not so authentic an impersonation as that of, say, the costermonger's little donkey by the little donkey himself. In fact, Bert is the least convincing performance in the show. But it is easily the best piece of calculated art, and as such must be declared the winner by many lengths. Unidentifiable pearlies and their donahs act with incredible zest, and the whole show is a great deal better than, I fear, this notice has implied.

## KEY TO MUSICAL COMEDY

*Savoy.*

*Tuesday, March 1, 1932.*

### “PAULETTE”

A Musical Comedy. By Stanley Brightman and Arthur Illingworth. Music by Harry S. Pepper

*Palace.*

*Friday, March 4, 1932.*

### “THE CAT AND THE FIDDLE”

A Musical Play. Music by Jerome Kern. Book by Otto Harbach

THE world, philosophers tell us, is criss-crossed and honey-combed with royal roads that are not royal and golden rules that are not golden. Yet it cannot be all maze and no key, since even the inscrutable ceases to be so if and when the scrutineers open their eyes wide enough.

The scrutability of musical comedy, then, is this week's theme, and to this I am provoked by three similar entertainments which, following on each other's heels, have met with very different results. One entertainment had its corns severely trod upon; the other two will tread out the golden corn for many a month. “Lovely Lady” fell upon doom because it was a hybrid, and because, like one of Mr. Galsworthy's heroines, it was “too fine, yet not fine enough”—*i.e.* too good for musical comedy but not good enough for comedy proper.

That mistake always ends in Doomington Street, since in the theatre you must either desert Mrs. Micawber or cleave to her wholly. There can be no half-desertions, as Mr. Wimperis should have known, and as the authors of “Paulette” have, in fact, known. In that piece they con-

ceived a plot in comparison with which that of Mr. Wimperis was an argument of Ibsen-like cogency, and spun a web of jocularity which shows Mr. Wimperis to have scaled the seventh heaven of witty invention.

Now must all this be substantiated in detail? Must it be recounted how Paulette was a Provençal bride who at the church door was torn from her groom's arms to masquerade as cabin-boy on an Englishman's yacht and later run a chocolate shop in Paris? Must proof be brought that the few oases in a desert of witlessness were when Mr. Peter Haddon was sent on to the stage to maunder timeless soliloquies interlarded with "old boy" and "old lad" and other ejaculations of heartsomeness? No, and for the old reason that the lawful is not necessarily the expedient, and the duty of a dramatic critic does not exact that he shall inflict upon his readers the boredom which he has himself experienced. Boredom, let it be remembered, which the audience at the Savoy signified by acclaim that it had not undergone.

For here, presumably, was recognisable musical comedy proper in all its blessed nothingness. Here, to invert the old fairy tale, were the new clothes with no Emperor underneath. Except for a powerful gentleman who inaugurated the third act there was nothing one would call singing, since some other word must be found for the vocalising of Miss Enid Stamp-Taylor, and Mr. Paul England's essays in the art will not pass muster until he desists from an ever-present vibrato like the thrummings of an unruly bath-tap. Mlle. Mireille Perrey warbled in the approved musical-comedy manner, but one dwells more gratefully upon the way she reinforced her acting with a natty little figure sheathed in satin beauté, two olive arms beauteously begyved, and a mop of tousled hair which at times strikingly recalled Sarah in her "Frou-Frou" days. A harsh critic might suggest that Mlle. Perrey acted too much and that a less devastating approach would have found our hearts more accessible. The best acting in the piece came, of course, from Miss Ena Grossmith. Why? Because Miss

Grossmith knows her job and knows it so well that she doesn't overdo it.

At this point I permit myself an observation of the constructive order. The last act contained a cabaret scene in which a ballet of sylphs was danced to Tschaikowsky's "Valse des Fleurs." The point is not whether we are or are not tired of this hackneyed tune, or whether it was or was not given full seaside honours by the band. The point is that there are scores of modern English composers languishing in neglect and capable of composing a ballet number in three-four time. If Mr. Pepper, who provided the music for this piece, shied at this number, then I think somebody might have been picked out of the peck of English pipers ready and willing and able to provide this tune. The opportunities for encouraging English music in the theatre are not so numerous that we can afford to neglect them. If the management did not know any modern English composers of ballet music I have no doubt that the Camargo Society would have been glad to give the necessary information. It shall now be said that the ballet was prettily danced, and that Mr. Pepper's music was always light and graceful.

The instantaneous failure of "Lovely Lady" and the cheerful acceptance of "Paulette" prove our thesis that musical comedy must never take the risk of being neither one thing nor the other, that is of falling between two stools. Musical comedy may be either joint-stool or Cassiopeia's chair; what it must not do is to ape at being the table between them, for with the pretence comes that pretentiousness which so greatly disconcerts a naïve audience. Quite the fatal thing is to enlist actors of known reputation on the legitimate stage, Mr. Clifford Mollison being the single exception to this rule. For here the audience, whether it knows it or not, experiences the humiliation of seeing something degraded, the art of gold-beating put to the service of breaking stones.

Anybody who has kept a paper-shop knows that the little typist who comes too late for her copy of "Meg's

Mag" is not to be fobbed off with any substitute, however luxurious. Similarly, your musical-comedy fan who has gone to the theatre to see a buffoon will not accept a comedian, though it be Coquelin himself. Particularly when, as in "Lovely Lady," it is the serious actor, Mr. Edmund Gwenn, who must turn the somersaults, and that master of gag and improvisation, Mr. Barry Lupino, constrain himself to speaking no more than his authors have set down for him. "Paulette," though a poor thing, very carefully avoided this mistake.

So did "The Cat and the Fiddle," not by dint of keeping buffoonery intact, which was "Paulette's" way, but by holding legitimate actors to their trade through the simple expedient of giving them legitimate material to trade in. This, then, was not musical comedy but a play with music. And what an enchanting show it was! First the score, where at once we note how on the programme the name of the composer was put before that of the librettist. Hammersmith papers please copy! There was not a phrase, not a bar, and not a note of Mr. Kern's music that the audience did not want to hear again, and this being so the battle was nine-tenths won. But this near-victory did not absolve the other partner in the collaboration from doing his share, which Mr. Harbach valiantly performed. For example, every word that clever actor Mr. Martin Walker had to utter was worthy of the *raisonneur* in the earlier comedies of Henry Arthur Jones.

The unaffectedly sentimental yet entirely rational story, which was set in Brussels, concerned two composers, one natively serious (Mr. Francis Lederer) and the other an American girl whose taste inclined to jazz (Miss Peggy Wood). The two fell in love, and the lack of smoothness in their love-affair had its counterpart in the warring counterpoint of their Muses, most wittily treated on two pianos by Mr. Kern. Advances on account of his opera were made to the young man by a theatre manager (Mr. Austin Trevor), who made other advances to the young

lady, these being liberally misinterpreted by the opera's prima donna (Miss Alice Delysia).

I can think of no more to say about the book except that the atmosphere was that of Henri Murger with some slight infusion of the modern film, the old story of Pierrot and Pierrette in the atmosphere of René Clair-de-lune. The scenery, a great deal of which had been painted on velvet in order to give depth to the shadows, was wholly delightful, and suggested with amusing discrepancy both Fragonard and Vlaminck. In the scene at the Opera there was an ostrich-feather tree, deliriously pink, whereby Mr. Oliver Messel's mouth and eyes might have been forgiven for watering. But all of the *mise-en-scène* pleased.

There remains commendation of the players, and rightly the allegiance of the house was plentifully divided. How could it be otherwise with Miss Wood giving freely of her natural charm and wayward honesty, Mlle. Delysia luxuriating in her glittering competence, Mr. Trevor revelling in French gallantry, and Messrs. Henri Leoni and Morton Selten contributing two charming sketches? There was a first-class pair of dancers in Mr. Fred Conyngnam and Miss Gina Malo, dancers who acted so well that they need hardly have danced.

But if a vote had been taken I think everybody would have been found to plump for Mr. Lederer, who for three hours all but two minutes played with a sincerity and a delicacy which were remarkable, and in those other two minutes carried away the house by a display of passion of which only an actor of first-rate talent could have been capable. From first to last this was an evening to delight the simple and satisfy the sophisticated—the high-water mark of the musical play. Or if the metaphor must be kept unchanged, not the joint-stool but Cassiopeia's chair, or at least a simple and touching model of that throne. This play's appeal was proved by the regretful sigh evoked by its quiet, unforced close. It was eleven o'clock, and we were not ready to go.

## A QUESTION OF TEMPERAMENT

*Old Vic.*

*Wednesday afternoon, March 9, 1932.*

### "OTHELLO"

#### Revival of Shakespeare's Tragedy

THE real performance of this play began when Emilia said, "O gull; O dolt!" and that is too late. It was also at this point that Miss Edith Evans began to be Emilia, since in all the earlier scenes she had been not Desdemona's woman but her governess, the decayed chaperon superior to her charge. I take it that Emilia is the wife of a man who married beneath him, and, Iago holding the rank he does, something plebeian. That there is a grossness about Emilia is proved by the relish with which she enters into Desdemona's query as to the amount of dishonesty she would commit to gain the world, and the slatternly gusto with which at the end she falls to abusing Othello. Miss Evans delivered her confession of potential venality with the nice malice of a cat invited by an eighteenth-century poet to state its views about goldfish. Again, her gait and the movements of her arms when she folded Desdemona's dress, though constituting a dance first gracious and then grave, did not, I take leave to think, belong to the character. But with Emilia's first salvo or discharge of honest heart all other criticism went by the board, and it was then that Miss Evans gave us the only real emotion of the afternoon.

Any performance of this play must stand or fall by its Othello, and if this is not right no sublimation that pedantry may fasten upon any other character in the play will compensate us. Now, there is only one question to be asked about any Othello: Has he temperament? We do not ask by this whether the actor correctly simulates the gestures and demeanour of passion, but whether he admits



us to the presence of a man whose nature in quiescence is already full to its banks, and with whom any and every expression can only be an overflowing. In this sense Mr. Wilfrid Walter is as temperamental as an usher at a well-behaved public school, and his assumptions of temperament, though industrious and conscientious, leave us cold. It is, of course, largely a matter of nationality, since while there may be three English actors capable of "looking at" the part in its first essential, every little pastry-cook in Italy, whether actor nor not, washes him in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire each time his wife makes eyes at the apprentice. If this quality is not present the performance must fail, and it is only when one is satisfied about this that it is worth while asking whether the actor has the requisite looks and presence, nobility and power, the faculty to suggest moral grandeur, and the ability to deliver verse. Mr. Walter's Othello is at once careful and perfunctory. Take the passage:—

Cassio, I love thee;  
But never more be officer of mine.—  
Look, if my gentle love be not rais'd up!—  
I'll make thee an example.

There are four separate emotions here, Othello's regard for Cassio, his regret at the necessity for his dismissal, his annoyance that Desdemona should be waked, and the consequent savagery of "I'll make thee an example." Mr. Walter delivered this passage on one level tone, calling Cassio's attention to the fact that Desdemona had been roused as indifferently as if he had asked him to observe the weather. I am afraid, too, that this actor's delivery of verse is too modern for Shakespeare; at least his vowel-sounds are those one hears on prize-giving day at a school in Highgate. Mr. Walter must not take it amiss that one does not think he can play Othello. If this is not the most difficult part in the whole range of English drama it is still one which requires special qualification, the ability to suggest that passionate saturation the negation of which constitutes the English temper.

Now about Iago. The difficulty with this character is that Shakespeare having done an infeasible thing, we still insist upon the actor attempting that thing which Shakespeare made infeasible. The text gives two lame reasons for Iago's conduct, which have been supplemented by the critical explanation that Iago's diabolism, coming direct from the Devil and therefore outside human logic, is to be accepted as a self-sufficient thing. We are, I understand, to have presently a fourth explanation, which will be of the Freudian order. But that can wait. The immediate point is that Shakespeare has insisted upon Iago having more brains, a finer subtlety, and a greater metaphysical itch than almost any other of his characters, and upon his hiding all these behind a mask of superlative honesty. Now to look like the flower and be the serpent under it is a part of feminine equipment, whereas the male actor who must achieve this can do so only by having one face for the characters in the play and another for the audience; in other words, he must have a virtuosity unpossessed by any player since Kean. Irving could look evil with one cheek and saintly with the other, but even that great actor could not compass the monster in the guise of *faux bonhomme*. Failing supreme virtuosity, what shall the actor attempt? Shall he contravene Shakespeare's instructions and so make us despise Othello for being too easily the dolt and gull? Or shall he stick to Shakespeare and present so singly honest a face that even the audience can read nothing else? Mr. Ralph Richardson chose the second course, and growing more and more honest as the play proceeded convinced us that he could not hurt a fly, which was very good Richardson but indifferent Shakespeare.

Except that it was on the young side Mr. Robert Harris's Cassio was well-intended; Mr. Robert Speaight made an excellent Roderigo until the end, when, harking back to his Fluellen, he fell into the pribbles and prabbles of Sir Hugh Evans; as Lodovico Mr. Richard Ainley made a good popinjay of the Duke's envoy, perfectly reproducing what we may suppose to have been the manner of the

Venetian Foreign Office of the period. It will be kind to say that Desdemona is perhaps as much Miss Phyllis Thomas's part as it is that of any actress. I do not think, however, that she should say: "Am I that name, Iago?" as though Iago had reminded her of a boring luncheon engagement that she was trying to get out of.

*St. James's.*

*Monday, April 4, 1932.*

## "OTHELLO"

### Revival of Shakespeare's Tragedy

Othello, above all other tragic personages, needs great physical qualities in the performer —G. H. LEWES.

A physically insignificant Othello is inconceivable.—W. T. ARNOLD.

WILL received opinion do, or must I prove that the first condition of any Othello is that the actor shall be physically magnificent? I should not have thought this necessary if a colleague whose intellect I value highly had not asked me on going into the theatre why Othello should not have been a little man like Napoleon or Roberts. There is no reason except our old friend, the *optique du théâtre*, by whose logic Romeo must be a good-looking stripling and Othello a magnificent animal. But since it is possible that Shakespeare never heard of the *optique du théâtre*, let us refer to the text and see what is to be gathered from that first entrance in which, as is this playwright's way, the character is declared. Can all that talk beginning with "royal siege" and rising to the climax of "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul" be conceived as the crowing of a bantam? Rubbish! To be robbed of all that is towering in Othello is like being fobbed off with a snub-nosed Romeo, though there is no reason *in life* why Romeo should not be as plain as Traddles.

Is the reader worried about Desdemona's "I saw

Othello's visage in his mind"? Dear sir or madam, this is explanation, not apology! Just as Shakespeare calls our attention to the nobility of his blackamoor while our eyes are still taking in his physical splendour, so with equal care he repeats the pattern by giving Desdemona this line, since by it he endues her passion with a spiritual and poetic value and distinguishes it from your modern young woman's fancy for a jazz-drummer. Take away Othello's pride of body and Desdemona can only mean that while his dial, as she would say, is not up to much, his mentality is up to "The Waves" and D. H. Lawrence. Mr. Ernest Milton's physical limitations being what they are, Othello's famous line can only betray him, and we feel that this lover's *ultima ratio* ought to read: "She had a *mind*, and chose me."

Now how did under-sized Kean "get away" with Othello? Compensation, says Lewes, was to be found in this actor's lion-like power and lion-like grace, "and his eye! who can forget that eye?" But leonine is the last word one would use for Mr. Milton, who in place of the noble, perhaps vacant, and certainly slow, unblinking majesty of the King of Beasts exhibits the eager, nimble-witted watchfulness of one of the lesser and more apprehensive cats. I take it that the note of Othello is the sublimity of a great mind which is also a childish one, childish in its simplicity, trustfulness, and the inability to harbour suspicion. It is upon this open nature that Iago works, the only alternative being Othello's stupidity; and Othello is not stupid, only "perplex'd i' th' extreme." But guilelessness and the inability to perceive guile in others is the last quality to be conveyed by Mr. Milton, whose spirit is compact of umbrages, past, present and to come, and whose mind is quick with defences against attack from all quarters. It is this air of scenting injury which made this actor our best de Levis and our only Henry IV (Pirandello), designated him for Death in Casella's play—an inevitable choice—and qualifies him for all that is morbid in Shakespeare—Hamlet, Richard II,

King John. But Othello is magnificently alive, and to sickly him with the pale cast of excessive thought is not to play him at all. The piece is a tragedy of disintegration, and that cannot be disintegrated which nerves have already pulled apart.

The result is that the slow awakening of Othello's jealousy goes by the board. Iago's "That cuckold lives in bliss" would have fully awakened the husband of normal apprehension, though in Othello's case the mine is at this point only half-sprung. With Mr. Milton we cannot understand that the explosion does not occur at the first charge, and wonder that Iago is allowed to proceed with his "Steal away so guilty-like," "No further harm," and all those equivocations about for aught he knows and daring to be sworn. This mind, which obviously travels faster than its tormentor's, must have taken the alarm at the first whiff of jealous prompting, and we feel that the horrid mention of "cuckold" must have ended the play there and then. The worst of that intellectual subtlety of which Mr. Milton is a master is that it cannot counterfeit slow-wittedness, and this being so the play's most ingenious scene is deprived of its excitement.

Of Fechter's Othello it was said that "even if the actor had been calm and simple in his gestures he could not have been dignified and impressive; nature had emphatically said No to such an effect. Voice and bearing would have failed him." In the early part of the play Mr. Milton's bearing has immense dignity, and the speech to the Senate can seldom have been said better. Later on his bearing founders because too much is asked of it. Half of Othello lies in the actor's voice, and one has to say with regret that Mr. Milton's, besides being of insufficient volume, is distinguished for a quality which is the last that should go with Othello. Used conversationally this voice has light and shade and a certain music; whenever the actor must let it out rhetorically, and whenever there is any poetry to be mouthed, it soars into the treble, to become some-

thing between a moan and a whine, like the wind whistling among gibbets.

Mr. T. S. Eliot has said of the speech beginning "Behold, I have a weapon," that here Othello is cheering himself up prior to the business of despatch, lashing himself into the requisite fury and rather like, I suggest, a nervous cricketer whistling his way to the wicket. Mr. Milton fails completely here, and the last four lines, of which Salvini said the sense should be drowned in noise, are lost in a frenzy of soundlessness. To compensate for this the actor attempts to convey the matter by jerking his body to and fro like a released Jack-in-the-Box whose wires are still quivering. It is this vocal inadequacy that turns Othello's rages into tantrums, and his fulminations about forty thousand lives and nine years a-killing into bagpipe dronings. I shall conclude this estimate by repeating what was said by an earlier critic of the German actor, Dessoir, in the part: "I regard his performance as unsatisfactory, but as the performance of a highly intelligent actor struggling against natural deficiencies."

Mr. Henry Oscar, cutting Iago according to his natural cloth, and realising that diabolism cannot be got into round, smooth, boyish features, concentrates upon plausibility, leaving the motive for villainy very much where Shakespeare left it, that is in the dark. His plausibility, however, is complete, and has exactly that shade of contempt which goes with the inferiority complex. Miss Lydia Sherwood cannot overcome the initial difficulty of having to melt us with Desdemona's fragility of intellect while convincing us that she has enough strength of mind to choose a darkie. In the later parts she is more successful. Mr. Nicholas Hannen presents in Cassio the gentleman who, overcome by drink, remains a gentleman, and Mr. George Thirlwell as Roderigo avoids the fantastic, which I think is a mistake. Miss Athene Seyler makes Emilia a comfortable soubrette to have about the house, and Miss Flora Robson, equally unsuited as Bianca, achieves a little

miracle. Since Miss Seyler is a first-class comédienne, and since Miss Robson could play all the hags in "Richard III" lumped together, it is obvious that the two should have changed rôles. Even so the piece would still have been run away with by Miss Robson and Mr. Oscar pounding neck and neck, with Mr. McKnight Kauffer's beautiful scenery half a length behind.

## A FIRST PRINCIPLE OF ACTING

*Arts.*

*Wednesday, March 16, 1932.*

### “RUDOLPH OF AUSTRIA”

A Play. By Graham Rawson

THIS play is all about a Crown Prince of Austria who writes to the Pope asking for a divorce, and pretends to the Emperor, his father, that his marriage is not an affair of State. In the end he and his young woman carry out a death-pact when they could both have slipped over the frontier and sought this country. The author may plead that he was bound by historic fact, which one counters by saying that while truth may be stranger than fiction it can also be duller, and that because a thing has happened is no reason why a play should be made out of it. Mr. C. M. Hallard was excellent as the Emperor Franz-Joseph. The actor who played the Crown Prince had just recovered from influenza, and his difficulties of memory, while arousing sympathy, did nothing to help the play. But I doubt if any acting could have brought this dead material to life.

When a play is crashingly dull the critic has only two resources. One is sleep, in justification whereof I shall quote William Archer's dictum that the first qualification for a dramatic critic is the capacity to sleep while sitting bolt upright. Indeed, I remember being next to Archer at a French farce throughout which the gay fellow slept unbrokenly, waking in the intervals to refresh himself with a volume of *The Decline and Fall*. To my subsequent dismay he wrote of preposterousness more coherently than the rest of us who had kept awake! The second and last resource is to look round the cast for some new acting which means a



new-comer, since that the old and tried favourites are doing anything except run through their exceedingly old and excessively trying tricks would be the wildest pretence.

Some plays are boring even before the curtain goes up; you may say of them that with the rise of the curtain loss of interest begins. Now, a play may be boring in two ways. It may bore *per se*, and so plumb depths of tedium which not even your magnetic player can relieve. I once saw a drama called "Vincennes." This was about Marie Antoinette, and all that Sarah Bernhardt could do to lighten the dreary orgy was to wear a puce going-away, or better getting-away, dress and, when she couldn't succeed, lay that puce bodice and the tousled auburn mop which was her hair upon a violet tablecloth in a mauve boudoir, the whole fusing into a sea of raspberry-sauce about which I still have nightmares.

Again, the play may bore not because it is dull, but because the players make it so. With great actors—indeed, it is a way of defining the kind—their greatness sticks out a mile, and before they have opened their mouths. Sarah brought glamour on to the stage with her as obviously as if she carried it in a bag, and Duse was a portmanteau of the ineffable. Irving had only to get his nose past the door-jamb and you were prepared for the dæmonic or the seraphic. "A man all light there stood," or else all dark; you waited to see which way the Irving cat was going to jump.

With dull players, and there is no better way of defining dullness, the converse happens. See anybody except Sarah in "Phèdre," says Mr. Maurice Baring somewhere, and "one wondered where all the glory that was Greece, and all the grandeur that was Versailles, and all the music that was Racine had gone to." Such players, stealing from the shard-borne beetle his drowsy hum, present Macbeth as an uninteresting butcher, Hamlet as anybody's school-master, and Antony and Cleopatra as a bickering, everyday pair from Balham. When you get the dull actor superimposed on the dull play boredom's consummation is

complete, and there remains only, as Archer so well knew, that sleep which knits up the ravelled sleeve of professional playgoing.

Unless, one repeats, there is a new-comer to the rescue. On Wednesday evening Miss Margaret Vines leapt into the breach, if one can use that verb in connection with our shyest, most timorous neophyte. In the first act of "Take Two From One" this very young actress gave us a short ten minutes of unearthly radiance which took the shine out of everybody else, and the other evening she had not been on the stage five minutes, though I should prefer to say five seconds, before one realised that here, if she puts herself into the proper hands, is the next Viola, Cordelia, Desdemona and the whole category of faithful hearts. Her quality goes before her, and she has no need to make protestations of unswerving loyalty, since you know that you are in its presence and know that everybody else in the audience knows it too.

This being so, I propose to devote the rest of what I have to say about Miss Vines to fault-finding. She must not pronounce the words "opera" and "desperate" as though they were spelled "op'ra" and "desp'rate." But there is a more important matter, which is that now, at the outset of her career, she must realise that acting, say, Cordelia, is not just being Cordelia, but the demonstration to the audience that she is Cordelia. I recommend to this young artist a little volume of some rarity, G. H. Lewes's *Actors and Acting*. She will find in this volume the following passage :

French actors, when not excellent, carry the reaction [towards naturalness] too far ; and in the attempt to be natural forget the *optique du théâtre* and the demands of art. They will sit upon side sofas and speak with their faces turned away from the audience, so that half their words are lost. The art of acting is not shown in giving a conversational tone and a drawing-room quietness, but in vividly presenting character, while never violating the proportions demanded on the one hand

by the *optique du théâtre*, and on the other by what the audience will regard as truth.

To overdo the *optique du théâtre* is to play *at* an audience which is a vice, as opposed to playing to an audience which is a virtue. It is only the booby among spectators who regards a play as something real espied through a keyhole; it was this naive extremity which made the sailor jump upon the stage. The competent playgoer keeps two relationships going, the illusion of reality and his own æsthetic receptivity. The merely competent performer is one who satisfies only the first of these relationships; the highly competent player has to go one better and satisfy the second relationship by making it plain that, if a woman, she is not Phèdre but an actress simulating Phèdre, that she knows it and knows that we know it too. This foundation has to be laid before we can begin to build that house of cards which is the paradox of acting. Must the actor feel?—a question still asked, though disposed of long ago by Samson in a single couplet:

L'acteur qui du talent veut atteindre le faite  
Quand il livre son cœur doit conserver sa tête.

For a Roman to die upon his sword without extravasation of blood or other unpleasantness is an agreed part of stage propriety. Yet there are players who seek to move us with a display of naturalism in grief, which is generally ugly and most often ridiculous, whereas your performers of the highest class will keep their crying noble though they and we know it cannot be so. But elaborations are unnecessary. The first thing about acting is the recognition by player and playgoer that this art consists not in being, but in the simulation and presentation of it.

What comes when all this, which has been set down for the benefit of a young player, is contravened? The result to anyone in the first rows of the stalls is a diminution of pleasure, while to those further back there is very little performance left from which to derive pleasure at all. On Wednesday night I saw the third act from the last

row of stalls in the little Arts Theatre, and even at this comparatively short distance all that had seemed of interest earlier on had evaporated, leaving an indistinguishable and something mumbling young lady. It may be that Miss Vines is not a great player in embryo. At the same time, she is one of the only two novices now claiming attention—the other is a youth—to whom I am not prepared to deny the possibility of greatness, all the other young people who began by doing an exquisite thing having become, at too early a period, “set” in that particular exquisiteness.

Miss Vines has, so far as I know, only played three parts, and all of them of the fey or wistful order, and it may be that wit and verve, passion and power, are never going to be within her range. But she has not yet made it manifest that they are not! In the meantime she has accomplished the little she has attempted with so great and singular a degree of sensitiveness and perception that one wants to put her on the track which alone leads to acting of the highest class. Her present forte is shyness. So be it. Let her realise that Sarah, Duse and Ellen Terry, all past mistresses of speech trembling into silence, knew enough about the art of acting to plaster the back wall of the gallery with their lowest whisper, and always to give the audience four-fifths of their face.

## A LITTLE MASTERPIECE

*Criterion.*

*Friday, April 1, 1932.*

### "MUSICAL CHAIRS"

A Play. By Ronald Mackenzie

I HAVE seen this play twice, and am now ready to burn my boats about it. "Musical Chairs" is, in my view, the best first play written by any English playwright during the last forty years. It is a better work of art than "Widowers' Houses," for here the dramatist, as we realised later, bagged a good deal of the credit that was due to the reformer in political economy. It is a better play than "Journey's End," which owed at least as much to its subject as to its author. It is better than McEvoy's "David Ballard" and Houghton's "Hindle Wakes," since it reveals a finer mind and a wider sensibility. It is not better than "Berkeley Square," but that was the work of two authors, one of whom I believe to be an American. And it may not be better than "Nan," though it is thirty years or so since I saw that tragedy, and I cannot remember whether Mr. Masefield wrote other pieces before it.

Leaving first works out of it I say that Mr. Mackenzie's tragic farce is as good as the best work of Mr. Ervine or Mr. Van Druten. I call it a little play because, though it deals with the major themes of life and death, love and sorrow and laughter, it has not to the superficial view that specific gravity which, by their subject-matter, the plays of Mr. Shaw, Mr. Galsworthy and Mr. Drinkwater have the knack of taking to themselves.

My reasons for regarding this play as a small masterpiece are as follows. One, it tells a credible and tragic story

about something that matters. Two, that story is enlivened by a magnificent humour. Three, throughout it is as taut and spare as a barrel, which means that it is perfectly made and put together with maximum economy. Four, the characters are real, vivid and do not overlap each other. Five, as parts they are magnificently laid out for actors. Six, the interest of the action is so constantly renewed that we do not notice that the scene remains the same. Seven, the play is consistent with itself from first to last. Eight, it has been conceived as a play, which means that the stage is the unique vehicle for the expression of this thing and is perfectly used. Nine, the audible and visual surfaces of life are accurately produced. Ten, we come away from the theatre feeling that we have undergone an emotional experience. Eleven, the play could be translated into any language without loss of appeal, which gives the hint of universality. Twelve, this work of art has its own atmosphere, compounded of strangeness, melancholy and the wildest fun.

Now, is the play original and does it hold out further promise? Is it a tank or a spring? Here I shall temporise. The indebtedness to Tchekov and even Turgenev is obvious, since the last scene is "The Cherry Orchard" all over again and the whole plot owes something to "A Month in the Country," which, nevertheless, the author may not have seen! But here is the same theme of the ring of serpents each swallowing the tail in front of it. The neurotic, war-destroyed hero who loves, or has a bitter passion for, his stepbrother's wholly self-centred fiancée, but is loved by the family drudge, his step-sister. The hero's father, who loves his wife, is bored by her and indulges in a flirtation or worse with a mercenary little girl from the village. Everybody loves where he does not like and likes where he cannot love. The foreign setting—since the frame-work of the story concerns an oil-field in Galicia—accentuates the derivatory notion. This may be fallacious, and to disprove it the author should, in his next play, exchange Poland for Paddington. Are we to

see in Mr. Mackenzie a coming major dramatist? I cannot answer that, and am content to believe that he has done enough to be going on with.

The piece was marvellously well acted, and if I single out only Mr. Gielgud, who played with every nerve in his body and brain, and Mr. Vosper, whose Micawberish old fribble was a riot of pure joy, it is only because I lack space to appraise at their proper worth the lovely performances of Messrs. Finlay Currie and Jack Livesey, and Mesdames Carol Goodner, Margaret Webster, Amy Veness and Dorice Fordred. A perfect octet and, in Mr. Komisarjevsky, an inspired arranger of this music. Apropos there is a remark about Beethoven having been the world's man of greatest courage, to assent to which an old roysterer interrupts his hurly-burly. This may give some hint of this play's extraordinary quality, extraordinary not because somebody is right or wrong about Beethoven, but because all the characters who are competent to do so hold that it is the things of the spirit which are of the greatest interest. "Insensitiveness, stupidity, vulgarity of soul are God's best gifts, since by them alone can Man be happy." This may be nonsense, but it is unusual, plucky nonsense. If any reader see nothing remarkable here let him attend, say, a month of London first nights! Play and players were grandly received, and it looks as though that most miserable of all kinds of success, that of esteem and nothing else, has been weathered.

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## THEATRE OR RITE?

*Lyceum.*

*Saturday, April 9, 1932.*

### "THE MIRACLE"

Revival of Reinhardt's Spectacle

IN the one and only interval, when the congregation could temporarily break up, the ecstatic could be heard asking one another whether they would not give up the entire body of English dramatic composition for the least of Herr Vollmoeller's fancies.

A wise answer would have been No. Nobody is fonder of Shakespeare than I am, but I should not dream of asking anybody to sacrifice for, say, "Lear" the entire body of painting in the recent French Exhibition or even its tiniest canvas.

Does the reader think the cases are not on all fours? Let me suggest to him that the gap between French painting and a Shakespeare play is not greater than that between Herr Vollmoeller's wordless pantomime and the emotional orgy which astute showmanship and our confused thinking have made of it. Blood hath been shed ere now for lesser things than whether "The Miracle" is or is not "marvellous," to use the modern equivalent for "good entertainment," though probably the most of gore will accrue through discussion as to what kind of entertainment we should deem it. Is "The Miracle" theatre or rite?

The confusion is an old one. Rummaging the other day in some old volumes of dramatic criticism in the 'sixties, I came across a notice of a performance of the Oberammergau mystery play at the Théâtre des Variétés in Antwerp. Of this the leading English critic wrote:—

A dingy little theatre, where one would expect to see broad farces and bloody melodramas, was to be



the scene of a mimic representation of the most solemn and affecting of stories—a story so sacred that to Protestant feeling there is something shocking in the idea of its being brought into the remotest relation with anything like amusement, especially theatrical amusement. And, nevertheless, I believe that any Protestant who could have overcome the first repulsion would have witnessed the performance not only with deep interest but with the acknowledgment that it was deeply religious.

*Mutatis mutandis*, and with the recognition that the Lyceum Theatre is large and magnificent, the quotation seems to me to be of maximum appositeness. But is one quite so satisfied as to a comparison between the mystery play at Oberammergau before it was commercialised and the extreme sophistication of a London and West End production directed by Herr Reinhardt? The programme had this note: "Applause is not desired by the management during the performance," and one could not help wondering, since one remarked that the programme had not disdained such mundane matters as "titled ladies' gowns," whether the management desired us to turn up in evening dress.

The reader will perceive that I am feeling my way to the kind of judgment expected from me concerning a play which, it is suggested, is so much more than a play that it can only be produced in an imitation cathedral.

Is it possible that Herr Reinhardt subconsciously echoed Sir Toby's "I smell a device," and that Mr. Cochran followed suit with Sir Andrew's "I have 't in my nose too," the "it" in question being to *endimancher* whatever playhouse was chosen, and so confound two kinds of emotion which have not been in partnership since the drama's earliest days?

As a device this is first-class, for those who come for secular refreshment must submit to different wooing and the others are won already. At times one had the notion

that the expedient was not wildly different from that prevailing at "White Horse Inn" and recently adopted by that cinema which, when Edgar Wallace's racing film was produced, dressed up its commissionaires as Jockey Club stewards and its programme-girls as jockeys.

Across the mind, too, flickered the suspicion that there is no point at which, logically, the practice may be determined. Shall we, when next some great French actress treats us to "La Dame aux Camélias," find ourselves in some anti-macassared Parisian boudoir? The speculative field is rich, but the hour is late and the performance calls.

"The Miracle" is really a musical-tragedy version of Maeterlinck's "Sœur Béatrice," a play which contrived to be very moving without this extra-stage *décor*. Unless, of course, Maeterlinck took his idea from Vollmoeller, which seems unlikely; perhaps both plays have a common origin.

The first part, that which takes place in the cathedral, proves that whatever early Churchman had the notion of appealing to the religious spirit through its symbols hit upon something which close upon two thousand years have not altered. Dramatic critics sometimes get to the root of the matter, and our critic of the 'sixties was not far wrong when he wrote: "The common mind can only be impressed by visible symbols; and when these symbols are associated with primitive emotions their influence is religious."

The second part of the play is as unmistakably ballet as though it were something by Diaghilev. The plot about the young nun who breaks out of her cathedral to go gallivanting with a warrior and a robber prince and hobnobbing with royalty has nothing to do with any particular theology; indeed, this story of revolt from the contemplative life applies equally to China and Peru, Burmese temple, Thibetan monastery, any mosque, meeting-house, or tabernacle.

With this part of the play the japanning, stuccoing,

or whatever it is, of the Lyceum auditorium has nothing to do. We have ceased to be a congregation in the particular sense, and have become an audience sitting at a play. And a highly entertaining play, too, since among the characters are such notoriously good romantic "subjects" as courtesans and inquisitors, camp-followers and executioners, court mignons and nuns, whereby we appreciate that the old conflict between flesh and non-flesh has been given its head.

What we ought also to appreciate is the theatrical cunning which, placing a universal story in a setting of particular symbol, inclines us to attribute to the play a spirituality that it in no wise possesses. It is the old business of the misdirection of the conjurer announcing that he is about to do something he has in fact done. The mysticism, or whatever we like to call it, that we attribute to "The Miracle" is simply not in the play at all; it is we who bring it with us to the theatre. Regarded as spectacle, mime, and ballet the show is magnificent.

It would be impertinent for me to praise the dancing and choreography of M. Leonide Massine, about which I have no expert knowledge; I am told that both are of the highest order and am willing to believe it. But I can declare with sincerity that I have never seen richer or more realistic scenery and decorations than those designed by Professor Oskar Strnad; the cathedral is superb, and is perhaps the finest actor in the piece!

One would say that Mr. Oliver Messel's costumes are uniquely lovely except that one has not forgotten "Helen!" and it is possible that wit suits him better than sacerdotalism. Even now he is witty with discretion, though his statue of the Madonna attains to the devotional and so adds to the general conspiracy. And the costumes throughout prove that whatever is the century of "The Miracle" Mr. Messel knows all about it.

As for the music I have the uneasy suspicion that, artistically considered, Humperdinck's share in the piece is of greater artistic integrity than Vollmoeller's, since

this is music content to be music as opposed to a play which aspires to something more. Here I have a tiny criticism. Though we cannot be precise as to the factors composing the dramatic emotion we are aware that there is a lot of it, and, in fact, more than Humperdinck ultimately satisfies, even though to him have been added three collaborators.

Among the players Miss Tilly Losch stands out pre-eminently, her performance of the Nun being one of the most delicate, perceptive and brilliantly executed things ever seen in London.

Mr. Glen Byam Shaw as the cripple exhibits unsuspected power, and as the King's Son has remarkable quality. As the Warrior Mr. Ivan Brandt admirably recalls the popular Victorian print in which a knight in armour, mounted on a thoughtful horse, rides through a cornfield renouncing something or other.

But the whole cast welds itself into a mosaic of good miming, and the chorus acts throughout as though it knew what the piece is about, which is so unlike a chorus. I have left for the end the Madonna of Lady Diana Manners, which almost persuades me to go outside the theatre and into another range of values. Since the visual impression can only be described in technicalities belonging to the pictorial arts and outside my province, I shall only say that her look of puzzled ineffability seems to me to be exactly right, and that for one spectator the Saint's return to plaster and gold is the play's most poignant moment.

## TWO WAYS WITH NAPOLEON

New.

Monday, April 18, 1932.

### “NAPOLEON: THE HUNDRED DAYS”

A Play. By Benito Mussolini and Giovacchino Forzano.

Adapted by John Drinkwater

THOSE who fondly hold that plays about staggering events must necessarily be exciting theatre might like, in view of this piece, to reconsider their theory of drama. The Civil War and all that led to it make up one of the most momentous epochs in English history. But I submit that that third-rate playwright, W. G. Wills, did the dramatic and the exciting thing when, instead of long colloquings between Pym and Hampden, he centred his play in Henry Irving's magnificent sense of the theatre—can anybody forget the rebuke to Ireton, “Who is this—r-rude—gentleman?”—and his capacity for taking timeless farewells of Ellen Terry.

The French Revolution is admittedly one of the most animated periods of French history, but I do not see that Mr. Drinkwater or anybody else would make a good play out of dramatising Burke's *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*. That good working dramatist, Shakespeare, never fell into this intellectual trap, for though in “Julius Cæsar” he gives the highbrows excuse for babbling about the conspirators' breasts, he knew that to hold an audience of any grade of brow he must show Cæsar getting it in the neck! The toppling of an Empire, dramatic on the world-stage, must on the mimic stage become the fall of an Emperor, or it will move us less than the dropping of Dr. Rank's card into Helmer's letter-box. The Great War is the world's greatest drama to date, which does not mean that minute analysis of Bethmann-Hollweg's excuses for

tearing-up "a scrap of paper" can ever make as good an evening in the theatre as Mr. and Mrs. Kendal gave us in the entirely peaceful comedy of that name.

I hope readers will bear with me while I elaborate this, since it is only by getting to the root of the matter and understanding it that we can comprehend why a play about the most dramatic figure in modern history can make poor theatre. Perhaps it will help if we recall one of the most poignant of modern personages, Dreyfus. Anybody who has tried to make a stage-play out of the *Affaire* must have found that the human drama is always losing itself in a four-square wrangle about Semitism, Clericalism and their antis. Which, of course, brings up Mr. Shaw. Which, again, is exactly what I wanted.

Somewhere in the 'nineties our master-arguer was objecting to Shakespeare's view of history as monarchs marching up and down instead of the march of national thought, with the implication that Shakespeare was a worse dramatist than the late J. R. Green, who never wrote a play at all! What Mr. Shaw really meant was that whereas Shakespeare did pretty well in one kind of play, he, Mr. Shaw, was preparing to do better in another kind. The time came when Mr. Shaw tackled one of Shakespeare's subjects, and while there is not an ounce of poetry in the author of "Saint Joan," we can search all three parts of "Henry VI" without finding any thought good enough to go into Mr. Shaw's speech on heresy.

Faced with the subject of Napoleon, Signor Mussolini had to decide between Shakespeare's way and Shaw's, and at once it becomes pertinent for us to remember who Signor Mussolini is, since to ignore this would be the very pedantry of criticism. About Signor Mussolini's powers as a dramatist we knew nothing till we saw this play, but we did know that the Duce is a born leader of men. Now if the new dramatist intended to take Shakespeare's way with Napoleon it could only be because he had up his sleeve the power to say the grand and luminous thing, such a thing as Balzac found when he wrote: "La gloire est le soleil des

morts," which has all the Shakespearean sound and fury and, Mr. Shaw would say, signifies nothing, but which, it is to be held, on the stage will do very nicely, thank you! Even before the curtain went up on "Napoleon," one felt that the odds against a world-figure turning out to be a world-dramatist were pretty handsome.

But if Signor Mussolini was going to elect for Mr. Shaw's way, and call his play "Saint Helena," how much easier and more probable the thing became! No man can be of the Duce's stature without having any quantity of mind, and just as Mr. Shaw turned Julius Cæsar inside out, so it was possible that Signor Mussolini was going to reveal the essential Napoleon. Did the Corsican really love the French, or anybody except himself? What was he going to do with world power when he had achieved it? What goes on in that kind of mind? Is the urge mere self-aggrandisement or something kin to the creative spirit in the artist? Was Napoleon the world's greatest blessing or curse? Did he ever ask himself this question, and what was the answer? Is tyranny the highest form of government? Is democracy sweetest when it is trodden under heel and bruised? I have no doubt that Mr. Shaw has a list of the proper questions to be asked and answered, and it seemed to us that in the second event these, and these only, could be Signor Mussolini's play.

Alas! it turned out that our modern Napoleon had no other intention than to present the facts *exactly as they happened*—which needs only competence, and not any kind of genius—and leave severely alone both kinds of embroidery, the poetic and the philosophic! But in this case the facts lead away from Napoleon and point to Fouché, just as in another play they lead away from Cæsar and point to the conspirators; and it is not in anybody's power to make a play out of the dry bones of dead-and-gone French politics. Mr. Drinkwater, who has been brought in to translate and titivate this piece, says in the programme's prefatory note: "When Shakespeare brings Warwick and Bedford, Salisbury and Exeter on to the stage, half his

battle as a dramatist, so far as I am concerned, is already won." But how true is the proverb about one man's meat being another man's poison! So far as I am concerned, Shakespeare gives a passable imitation of a losing battle when he writes:

Where is the Earl of Wiltshire? where is Bagot?  
What is become of Bushy, where is Green?

the point, when I am spectator, being not where they are but who they are. How, then, shall one who cannot enthuse over Shakespeare's nonentities take an impassioned interest in the nobodies with whom history surrounded Napoleon, with this additional difference—that whereas Shakespeare made minimum use of his minor characters, in Signor Mussolini's case they are nearly the whole conflict?

That "The Hundred Days" should be about the end of the greatest game ever played on the chessboard of Europe is no reason why, dramatically speaking, Napoleon should appear only in the end-game, and a good two hours of this play are devoted to getting us to the point where Fouché announces mate in three moves. The last hour, however, is superb in the manner of W. G. Wills, though with less incitement to tears and a resulting higher power of emotion. Contrariwise, the play has the quality of its one defect. If it aims at history naked and unadorned, it at least does not seek to tinker up history with fustian. To pretend to rhetoric and achieve only rodomontade might be a definition of melodrama, and to this our authors nowhere descend. Indeed, the last act has the momentum of tragedy left to tell its own tale; if the play could be silently filmed one would say that here is the perfect screen tragedy.

It would be impossible to praise too highly the artistic intention which lies behind the presentation of this piece and its production by Mr. Robert Atkins. Each of Mr. George Sheringham's sets is a thing of beauty, and I fervently hope will be a joy for some considerable time. It would not be fair to make any definite judgment of Mr. Atkins's Napoleon, since that good actor, in addition to



bearing the immense burden of a huge production, took up the part at very short notice. Mr. Atkins is an actor of the old school, and as such requires words for his effects; and since, as already explained, these were not forthcoming, the result was that he appeared to give a "sleepy" performance.

But Napoleon, though on the way to extinction and conscious of it, was not yet extinct, and one thought that more flashes should have come from the old volcano which did little more than rumble. On the other hand, Mr. Atkins must be given credit for a resolute attempt to pour himself into his great model, and an equally resolute rejection of anything outside that model. Relying upon a remarkable resemblance in face and habit, he struck the fewest possible attitudes, and though there may be more in the part than his playing showed, there was nothing which, produced in the Euclidean sense, would not have been Napoleon. Probably the performance is a good deal better now, since all that it needed was a little gingering up, or, say, a quicker recollection of Enobarbus's:

'Tis better playing with a lion's whelp  
Than with an old one dying.

Mr. Arthur Wontner's performance of that sinister fox, Fouché, was brilliantly devised and executed. I am afraid I do not know enough history to certify to the accuracy of Miss Haidée Wright's portrait of Napoleon's mother, and will only say that the character was presented by this great little actress with a controlled intensity and a banked-up ferocity which suggested that she could have played Napoleon! Among an enormous cast two good pieces of acting by Mr. Guy Pelham Boulton and Mr. H. St. Barbe-West stood out, and I should have liked Mr. Murray Carrington's Duke of Wellington better if he had had more nose.

Whatever fate attends this production it must be hailed as an honourable attempt to do a big thing, and one which nowhere fails in dignity.

## MR. PRIESTLEY HOLES IN ONE

*Lyric.*

*Tuesday, May 17, 1932.*

### "DANGEROUS CORNER"

. A Play. By J. B. Priestley

MR. PRIESTLEY has rung the bell, scored a bull's-eye, or whatever sporting simile you prefer to denote the complete artistic success. It is the merest accident of time that a pronouncement which has achieved a certain notoriety—"the best first play written by any English playwright during the last forty years"—was not affixed to his play instead of to Mr. Mackenzie's. That there is no point of similarity between these two pieces should not dissuade the enterprising critic from declaring ways in which they surpass and yield to one another. I take "Musical Chairs" to be the more enjoyable because every one of its characters has some aspect of loveliness and because zest and fun abound, whereas all the characters in "Dangerous Corner" are hateful, zest has become an eager, prying morbidity, and the fun is a kind of ghoulish licking of the chops. But among the more childish blunders of criticism is to confound the enjoyment derived from a play on account of its subject with the delight in the craft that has gone to its making. In the case of these two plays I shall say that Mr. Priestley has put up a more easily recognisable display of playwriting skill, considered absolutely, and granted that playwriting is a matter of putting on to paper words that later are to be mouthed from a stage.

There is no suggestion of any debt to any other playwright, and perhaps Mr. Mackenzie owed more to Mr. Komisarjevsky than Mr. Priestley owes to clever Mr. Tyrone Guthrie. That atmospheric play was not so perfect that bad production could not easily have ruined it;

whereas the present affair is of that cut-and-dried order which would require producing of malicious and wilful ingenuity to hurt it. There is the plot and there are the words; the actors have only to get on with both. Here, again, the discriminating reader will demand that I should differentiate between two kinds of playwriting, which I do with pleasure. There is that kind of playwriting which, like Mr. Mackenzie's, takes into account the visual aspect of a play when it is acted. And there is that kind of playwriting which, like Mr. Priestley's, would be very nearly as exciting if the actors stood with their backs to the audience and read their parts from a book. But every playwright must be given credit for the effect his play has when it is produced to its own infinity along its own lines, wherefore Mr. Mackenzie was entitled, so to speak, to Mr. Komisarjevsky's magnoperative skill, and Mr. Priestley, being obliging enough to do nine-tenths of Mr. Guthrie's work for him, is equally entitled to Mr. Guthrie's modicum remainder.

One said that Mr. Priestley's characters were hateful, by which one meant no more than that the book of everybody's inner life as taken down by the Recording Angel probably bears much closer resemblance to Mr. Joyce's *Ulysses* than to the arithmetic prize at a Girls' High School. The passion of loving is the one most convenient for stage illustration, and it so happens that human nature which ought to love by the Rule of Two—incidentally sufficient for the propagation of the species—insists upon loving by the Rule of Three. Mr. Priestley's characters are six in number, not counting a lady-novelist. Some of these six characters are intermarried and some are not, but each loves and is loved by the wrong person, and each has been guilty in thought or deed, while all of them have been victimised, irrespective of the normal divisions of sex and in the way of love, friendship and money, by a character who, we learn, shot himself six months before the piece opens.

The whole of the play hangs upon a chance remark of

one of the women, "chance" in the sense that she incautiously lets out of the bag of polite concealment a bit of the truth, not foreseeing how terribly sharp Pussy's claws can prove. So sharp that before the end there is not a shred of decency left on anybody, whereupon Mr. Priestley starts his play all over again, till we come to the fatal remark which on this occasion the lady refrains from making. If this is not a brilliant device I do not grasp the meaning of either word, and if the plot is not a piece of sustained ingenuity of the highest technical accomplishment, I am, not an impercipient donkey, but an ass who has perceived too much. In fact, I regard the whole play as original in design, first class in execution, and marked throughout by the one thing that really matters—quality. It is about something. The characters are alive, by which one means that their speech is their mind's betrayal rather than a dramatist's lines, which again means that having been set in motion they appear to go on by their own volition; they do not say a word too much or too little; they keep the spectator in a state of tension, and finally, though this is on a lower plane, they present him not only with a credible study in real life, but also with an excellent puzzle of such extreme complication that a *précis* here is impossible.

Let me meet two objections, that in real life the husband who insists on uncovering the cesspool would have desisted at the first hint of a bad smell, and second, that plays ought not to be about bad smells. The answer is that every playwright must be allowed the peg on which to hang his play. Otherwise Macbeth's answer to Lady Macbeth's "Was the hope drunk?" was simply "Yes!" followed by a mixed foursome with the Banquos. Must we not have morbid plays? Come, come! Subdivision: must not the treatment of morbid subjects be in itself superficially morbid? I do not see how to avoid it; you cannot investigate drains with the expression of one going over an eau-de-Cologne factory. Incidentally Mr. Priestley has treated with skill and understanding a matter which

on the stage is usually a subject for facetiousness, and I congratulate the Censor on having passed what must have been a difficult play. It is extraordinarily well acted by Mesdames Marie Ney, Flora Robson, Isla Bevan and Esmé Church, and by Messrs. Richard Bird, William Fox and Frank Allenby, among whom I shall make no distinctions. I hope it will be sufficient to say that, with one possible minor exception, each and every one of these players attacks and successfully overthrows a part whose difficulties begin where the triumphs of the average commercial piece end. If this play does not take the town it will be the town's fault. In Mr. Priestley we have an obviously first-class playwright in the making. If adequate encouragement is not forthcoming and Mr. Priestley should decide not to go on with the job, the public will have only itself to blame.

## MISS FORBES-ROBERTSON'S VIOLA

*New.*

*Wednesday, May 25, 1932.*

### "TWELFTH NIGHT"

Revival of Shakespeare's Comedy

MR. MAURICE BARING, looking to the time when the last of those who saw Sarah Bernhardt shall have passed away, has said that what she and her art were like will be among the permanent guesses of mankind. I could not help wondering the other evening what Mr. Baring, or any connoisseur of acting, or even the playgoer of ordinary sensitiveness, is to make of Miss Jean Forbes-Robertson's performance in this play. This is one of the most baffling problems ever offered by living player to contemporary critic, who in this instance receives no help from the actress and is left strictly guessing. Of this Viola's effect upon the playgoer there can be no doubt; the difficulty of objective criticism is merely that confronting every critic who, having been moved by strange and disturbing beauty, searches for the words which shall convey the exact quality of that disturbance.

But the modern critic holds, or is taught, that it is his business to go behind the achievement of the artist and conduct searching inquiries along the line of intention. It is not enough, he is told, to say that Mozart wrote a pretty tune; it is his job to declare why nobody else but Mozart could have written it, and to discover what quality it was in Mozart that forced him to write that particular combination of notes and no other. He may not even decline the gambit as Mozart himself declined it when he announced the method of his Muse to be as much beyond his control as the shape of his nose.

Now, either this last is nonsense, or Mozart is as much or as little of an artist as a linnet, a waterfall under moonlight, or any other beautiful and helpless thing. Applying this to Miss Forbes-Robertson's performance, we have to ask ourselves whether it is effortless and hit upon not by accident but by that fatalism which marks the inability to do a thing in any other way. To what extent is this Viola the outcome of some desperate battle like that which Keats waged with the famous line about "perilous seas"? How often has the actress tried different renderings of a passage and weighed this excellence against that? How far is that exquisite immaturity of youngest green unfolding to the light the result of conscious artifice? Mozart talked of his nose. Can what ought to be art in this actress's performance be no more than the result of her chiselled inheritance, a poise and a profile which, before she has spoken, bring a lump to the spectator's throat? Miss Forbes-Robertson undoubtedly owes something to being the merest slip of womanhood. But would the addition of a chopine damn her?

Perhaps to inquire why a thing is is to waste time which could be more usefully spent in affirming what it is. I will not say that this is the one and only perfect Viola, for there have been others, Ellen Terry's for example, in which fun and tenderness were contrasted like sunshine and some woodland pool. Nothing is contrasted in this Viola, where the sauciness alluded to by Olivia is no bubble of unreflecting gaiety but the considered candour of an uncompromising little realist old beyond her years. If one could think that anything in this performance is deliberate one would cite an avoidance of points which any fussy, competent actress would be ashamed to miss. Miss Forbes-Robertson's opening:—

And what should I do in Illyria?  
My brother he is in Elysium—

followed by "Perchance he is not drown'd" and this, again, by "What think you, sailors?" had no more emotion

than would be used by somebody arriving at St. Martin's Lane after looking for the New Theatre in the Charing Cross Road, hoping the curtain is not up, and asking whether the commissionaire thinks it is. Then take the passage:

I am all the daughters of my father's house,  
And all the brothers too: and yet I know not.  
Sir, shall I to this lady?

Miss Forbes-Robertson speaks this on one level note, though surely there are three tones here—the witty evasion, the little pang, and the starting of a fresh topic, the last of these being accentuated by the Duke who, having had enough of Viola's affairs and wanting to get back to his own, says: "Ay, that's the theme!"

But the point about Miss Forbes-Robertson's performance, though one may fault it here and there, is that its sum is absolute and flawless perfection however attained. It is possible, and even probable, that the smallest addition of any art, artifice, or conscious thought would destroy it. Viola's steel-true and blade-straight quality, her sticking to the spirit as well as the letter of Orsino's instructions, can never have been conveyed better. One spectator, who has seen this performance three times, is always at Viola's first entry brought to the verge of tears, with the rest a mere blur. What other tribute would any Viola have? If Montague had lived we should have had some phrase to immortalise this grave baby; as it is, I can only salute and call attention to a perfect and perhaps unintentional thing.

Up other streets are the blazingly competent and brilliantly professional performances of everybody else. There is Miss Phyllis Neilson-Terry, who brings to that wilting bloom, Olivia, all the colour and perfume of a Botanical Garden, with a bit of Queen Elizabeth thrown in. There is Mr. Robert Atkins, who, as Sir Toby, acts the drunken scene very well indeed, but does not "play" Sir Andrew as deliberately as he might. So long as Mr. Norman Forbes cares to act the part of Aguecheek it is, of course, his for the asking, and to Malvolio Mr. Arthur Wontner brings an



inner life which helps to make credible the savagery of the prison scene. The rest of the cast is so-so, except that Mr. Godfrey Kenton manages to get some emotion into the not good part of Sebastian. The mounting is elegant, and Mr. Herman Finck has devised the incidental music with exceptional tact and helpfulness. The piece is well produced by Mr. Robert Atkins, except that the last verse of the concluding lyric is taken away from the Clown and given to Olivia. This is an unwarrantable and damaging mutilation of Shakespeare's pattern, which I must believe to have been thrust upon Mr. Atkins. It would be no defence if Miss Neilson-Terry sang like Jenny Lind, Patti and Melba put together, which she very nearly does. If Shakespeare had wanted Olivia to wind up this play he would, not being inarticulate, have said so. More in anger than in sorrow let me tell whoever is responsible that in "Twelfth Night" it is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue. The innovation is not as any person of taste will like it.

## MR. SHAW CRIES IN THE WILDERNESS

*New.*

*Tuesday, September 13, 1932.*

### "TOO TRUE TO BE GOOD"

By Bernard Shaw

"WHAT Price Hollywood?" is the name of a film now making a Regent Street sensation. Perhaps "What Price the Universe?" would have been a better title for the play now running in St. Martin's Lane, since in it Mr. Shaw asks what value modern thought can still set on the metaphysicians, philosophers, moralists and what not, who, from the Beginning of Time down to the beginning of August 1914, had safeguarded the journey from cradle to grave. My reading is not deep enough to tell me exactly how much help the old Greeks and Romans received from their gods and goddesses; I have a shrewd suspicion that they kept stiff upper lips and took what was coming to them. Later on Man was persuaded to believe in a system of rewards and punishments according as his deeds were good or naughty, until this came to be deemed too anthropocentric a view of the universe, when somebody invented that blessed thing "rational Determinism."

This did very well until the perverse discovery that the electron, hitherto supposed to obey the laws which Newton had laid down for the Great Nebula in Orion, does nothing of the sort, but wanders about according to its own sweet will. Even since Mr. Shaw's play was written Sir James Jeans, I think it is, has suggested that there are other universes in which our logic ceases to function, cause does not produce effect, and effect is not the result of cause. All of which has mightily disturbed Mr. Shaw, though the astonishing thing to me is that he should only

now experience that disturbance. But then I do not believe that this is so. I believe that he could have written this play any time during the last fifty years, but that until the war the world was not ripe for it, and that he knew of that unripeness.

The play's philosophic matter can never have been new to anybody suspecting that the price of individual existence is annihilation of the individual at death. Shakespeare knew all about this, and nowhere has any really comfortable thing to say about it. The point has always been how to get through life, and here the recommendation is not to let that capability and godlike reason which we have acquired through design or fluke fust in us unused. In other words, "Noblesse oblige" only in the sense that the meanest wage-slave is to utilise that self-respect which is his birthright. In any case, the individual who has wanted to keep sane has always taken to himself the advice of the old war-time song: "What's the use of worrying? It never was worth while." Worry will not give a man a future life, and whether there is one or not is strictly not his affair. As for the women, the matter does not concern them, because women have no interest in abstract matters. Broadly speaking, both men and women base their lives, in relation to the lives of other men and women, upon reason. But nations are different: Their conduct relative to one another is based upon unreason, as August 1914 generously proved; and I take it that this is the practical point of Mr. Shaw's play and the reason why he has produced it now.

The individual who really meant that great last speech to apply to himself would be half-way to madness, whereas the nations which should take it to heart would be half-way to sanity. "I am ignorant; I have lost my nerve and am intimidated; all I know is that I must find the way of life, for myself and all of us, or we shall surely perish," says the parson-burglar. But for the individual the way of life has been found already. Presuming that he is a Christian, he must be as good a Christian as he can. In a

much earlier play Mr. Shaw suggested that the author of the saying about selling all the rich man had and giving to the poor probably realised the objections which would be raised by the average stockbroker in the first ten minutes, and it would not surprise me to know that the author of that saying also realised all that was going to occur to Einstein in his last ten minutes to date, but knew also that the world was not ready for any kind of salvation other than material and personal. Nevertheless, "The Kingdom of God is within you" should be sufficient indication of that other point of view which for nearly two thousand years has been the only irrefutable dogma and the only refuge for the soul of man.

Now consider the nations. All of them are ignorant; all have lost their nerve and are intimidated; all they know is that unless they find a new way of living with one another they must all surely perish. This is why I take the kernel of this play to be the passage in which the sergeant first reads aloud Bunyan's: "I am for certain informed that this our city will be burned with fire from heaven, in which fearful overthrow both myself, with thee my wife, and you my sweet babes, shall miserably come to ruin, except some way of escape can be found whereby we may be delivered," and then reflects that: "London and Paris and Berlin and Rome and the rest of them will be burned with fire from heaven all right in the next war." The play asks what dogma shall save us from this, and if Mr. Shaw cannot find the answer it is not for me to propound one. I shall merely say that in my view this is a play less for individuals than for the Parliaments of the world.

No playwright has ever been more consistent with himself than Mr. Shaw. Exactly forty years ago the late A. B. Walkley twitted him with a mania for explanation. In this play Mr. Shaw makes his parson-burglar say:

Lucidity is one of the most precious gifts: the gift of the teacher: the gift of explanation. I can explain anything to anybody; and I love doing it. I feel I

must do it if only the doctrine is beautiful and subtle and exquisitely put together. I may feel instinctively that it is the rottenest nonsense. Still, if I can get a moving dramatic effect out of it, and preach a really splendid sermon about it, my gift takes possession of me and obliges me to sail in and do it.

What is true of Aubrey is also true of Mr. Shaw, except that while his sermon is really splendid his effects outside that sermon are neither moving nor dramatic. But there are plenty of people to entertain us with bright plots and dull unreal people, whereas Mr. Shaw reverses the process and gives us a dull unreal plot with shining and even glittering mouthpieces. It has been objected that the wit in this play is the cheapest that Mr. Shaw has yet minted. Exactly! Our great dramatist has always held that the only thing to which the English will give serious attention is buffoonery. It follows then that since the message of his present play is his gloomiest its manner must be correspondingly riotous. Here one could invent all sorts of polite cover. One could say that the play's three great speeches—couched in language that might be carved out of granite—are like pillars of fire rising from a desert of facetiousness. Or that the play is a magnificent powder ruined by the most tasteless jam that was ever made out of wood-pulp. I don't suppose Mr. Shaw minds what metaphors one mixes to tell him that nine-tenths of his play is unbearable, so long as one adds that the remaining tenth is ten times worth all the tedium we have endured. Besides, it isn't true about all of us, since the first night's ringing laughter probably reached from St. Martin's Lane to the windy plains of Troy.

The piece was run-away-with, in vulgar parlance, by Mr. Ralph Richardson, who spoke the long speech of the sergeant with a mediæval forth-rightness and a controlled passion beyond all praise; the actor, taking his time from Bunyan, affected us like a soldier coming into church from the open field. This was a grand performance, and

Mr. Shaw will agree that it could only have been achieved by a Shakespeare-trained actor. Mr. Cedric Hardwicke possesses not only a sense but a tact of the stage which is second to none. Guided surely by this, he did not attempt to turn a trumpet solo into a duet, but played oboe to Mr. Richardson, delivering the final speech with all that beauty of tone and phrasing which comes from acquired talent and natural artistry. Both players showed us how the English language should be spoken, while the actor who played the Elder painfully achieved the reverse. Mr. Ayliff, as producer, should certainly have insisted on a break in the speech at the words "Formerly, when differences with my wife"; there was, alas, no change in a backwoods delivery of the kind your repertory player deems suitable for Abraham Lincoln. Miss Leonora Corbett imposed a certain liveliness upon a part which was indubitably ghastly, though her more serious tirades showed that she has not yet mastered the long speech; Miss Ellen Pollock contrived to amuse in a thin field of humour and long after the crop had been gathered; and praise should be found for Messrs. Ernest Thesiger, Scott Sunderland, Walter Hudd, Donald Wolfitt and Miss Margaret Halstan. I foretell for this piece a very long run, since nine-tenths of it goes as merrily as an Aldwych farce, which means that at a cost of something like twenty minutes lowbrow playgoers may acquire a reputation for highbrow enjoyment. For this is not a piece which, as the jester in Mr. Shaw might say, "passeth understanding." Let us, in short, be wise and not gird at Mr. Shaw for his seeming folly, realising that when he condescends to be wholly serious it will be because he has nothing to say.

## TOO BAD TO BE TRUE

*Globe.*

*Tuesday, November 1, 1932.*

### "FOR SERVICES RENDERED"

A Play. By W. Somerset Maugham

"WHEN I love, I *do* love," is Drury Lane's chief contribution to the season's gaiety, and the converse hits off this play exactly. When Mr. Maugham hates he *does* hate, and the new piece shows him basking in his famous bitterness, apparently unaware that jaundice, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Now what exactly are we to deduce from the title chosen by this splenetic master? I suggest that "For Services Rendered" implies the indictment, the whole of the indictment, *and nothing but* the indictment, of this country's failure to recompense the renderers of service. Failure either through black ingratitude, or the equally damaging grey of bungled intention and the backsliding inherent in the scheme of things. Of all passions gratitude is the hardest to keep fresh. The fondest and nearest relative knows how nursing drags; that is why professional nurses are better. But in healing a nation's wounds we are distant relatives at best, and all of us are amateurs. Mr. Maugham forgets this, and is too busy being bitter about our lack of pity to find time for pity of his own. He is a modern Thersites who has come into the theatre wholly to rail. Well, there is room for a dramatist of too much brain and too little heart, and the opposite of that drawing-room sort which, in the language of the scurrilous Grecian, "wears his wit in his belly and his guts in his head."

But a playwright with the better pretence must be logic-perfect, and I suggest that this play as a war indictment fails on too many counts, since the things which it

alleges against war are chiefly the things for which war is not responsible. The great evil of the war years was that they demoralised character; Mr. Maugham in his bitterness has chosen a set of people who would be worthless with Peace piping her hardest. It is true that when the flower of a country's manhood is destroyed sex-starvation must be experienced by the country's womanhood, and Mr. Maugham shows the most delicate sympathy with Eva, the elder unmarried daughter of the country solicitor upon whose household the play turns. The girl lost her lover in the war, and her desperate wooing of the next best is done with extraordinary insight. But how about her sister, Lois, who at twenty-six sees herself threatened with Eva's fate? Does Lois go off with a man whom she likes, which would be understandable and not wholly discreditable? No, she rejects one sensualist who makes some kind of appeal to her and chooses another because she does not love him, because he is rich, and because "to care nothing for a man who is passionately in love with a girl gives her immense power over him." Can it reasonably be argued that the war determined the nature of this baggage? Or that a nation of exemplary gratitude could save Lois from herself? Then what could any nation do for Sydney, the blind son, who after fifteen-years still moons about the house meditating murderous epigrams? Might not this young man have better spent those fifteen years making inquiry as to what it is that gilds the faces of so many of his fellows in like situation? We hear nothing of any such effort, and in my view to blame the war for Sydney shows as much bias as to praise it for St. Dunstan's.

Then how about the ex-naval officer who, retiring after twenty years with the rank of Commander and the D.S.O., is now the unprosperous owner of a garage? Overdrawn at the bank and informed that no further cheques will be honoured, he nevertheless insists upon giving a number of stumers, and, to avoid arrest, commits suicide. Honestly, I cannot see how the war is to be blamed for



this. "He was a good sailor, but he knew nothing of business," says the old solicitor, and the blind son makes a sensational hit when he replies: "Why not put that on his tombstone?" But is the hit so good after all? Twenty years in the Navy should not, and do not, stupefy a gallant officer to the point of not knowing that whereas a bank's Yea is sometimes Yea, its Nay is invariably Nay. Actually the one thing which every ex-officer in either service knows all about is the nice conduct of an unclouded cheque-book, which has nothing whatever to do with business.

I must be brief in this tale of blame, for there is much to praise. But I cannot pass over the fact that the two sensualists and the hyena-like wife of one of them are not war-products, but a part of Nature's occasional and persistent ugliness. That Mrs. Ardsley's cancer is a tragic patch torn out of some other fabric and imposed upon this play. That the solicitor who, without perception of a wife dying and a daughter gibbering and with a suicide fresh on his hands, can indulge in afternoon rhetoric about the political situation does not exist except as the head of Mr. Maugham's nightmare household and owner of his *Villa Coloquintida*.

But an argument, though manifestly unsound, may be magnificently marshalled. Indeed, to achieve this is the hall-mark of your first-class politician and advocate, and I do not see why it should not be that of your dramatist. As sheer playwriting our stage has seen nothing so good for a very long time. The piece is put together like an Ibsen puzzle in which every bit fits. The business of blowing up the Ardsley household is conducted slowly, a little wedge of potential dynamite being inserted here and another little wedge driven in there, the explosion being reserved for the last act and the last minute of the last act, where the craftsmanship is electrifying. The old solicitor has just finished maundering his tea-table version of the toast in "Cavalcade," whereupon his daughter Eva, in the cracked voice of Ophelia's madness, falls to singing the National Anthem.

The dialogue is spare and taut with never a word too much or too little, and each character, complete in itself, provides a first-class chance for each and every actor. There comes a moment when the son, hearing his mother's death-sentence, crosses over to the sofa and, without a word, lightly kisses her. The mother makes no fuss, and says simply: "As you are up, Sydney, you might ring the bell." It is not often that our players are given such a chance as this, and that Miss Louise Hampton and Mr. Cedric Hardwicke should take it so grandly proves that up to this point they have utterly fulfilled everything given them by the author to speak, to think and to look.

In the part of the sex-starved daughter Miss Flora Robson contrives to give both the undercurrent of deep emotion and its ultimate flood, though I think her hysterics would gain in force if she would put a little less power into them. This is no time to argue the paradox of acting, but Miss Robson is a great enough artist to realise that because a character is at the end of its tether is no reason why the actress should be at the end of hers. In fact, she must not be. As Lois Miss Marjorie Mars presents an accurate and clever study of calculation veneered by niceness, while the two sensualists and the Commander are perfectly realised and turned into highly individual portraits by Messrs. Cronin Wilson, S. J. Warmington and Ralph Richardson.

There is a very difficult part for Miss Marda Vanne, who, herself a young actress, must simulate the middle forties made up to look like the twenties, and be outwardly gracious, while inwardly ridiculous. Miss Vanne's work here is well worth attention, and deserves respect, though it cannot quite succeed, and, in addition, she is the victim of Mr. Maugham's one technical mistake in this play—that of giving this character a hysterical outburst less important than the one immediately preceding it. Mr. C. V. France does the ratiocinative dodderer perfectly, even to the extent of putting a palisade of plausibility round him, and Mr. David Hawthorne and Miss Phyllis

Shand fill in agreeably as the family's doctor and parlour-maid.

One character remains unaccounted for, and it is evidence of the wealth of interest that I have been unable to find room for it in my *précis*. This is the third daughter, who in the war days fell in love with a uniform and married its wearer. The character is performed by Miss Diana Hamilton, who by her blazing mastery of the unspectacular contributes a piece of acting which I have half a mind to single out as the best thing of the evening. But perhaps it is safer to say that where all is good there can be no best. Mr. Shelving's scenery is exceptionally good, and I take Mr. Ayliff's production to be faultless, since it fulfils the author's intention with obvious exactness.

To conclude, the truth about this play can be put in three short sentences. It is faulty in argument. It is a piece of dramatic carpentry of which the English theatre may justly be proud. It is the work of a man possessed of something like genius. Let us hope that we shall not be able to put the truth about the English playgoer into one still shorter sentence: This play did not run.

## AS THEY LIKE IT

*Ambassadors.*

*Wednesday, December 21, 1932.*

### "THE STREETS OF LONDON"

Revival of the Play by Dion Boucicault

WHEN does the dust of an earthy to-day become the earth of a dusty to-morrow? And can your dusty answer by ingenious manipulation be turned into something not so dusty? Asking Mr. Newman's leave, and taking the occasion to wish him a Happy Christmas, I shall encroach for a moment on his province in order to get a better look at my own. Perhaps it isn't wholly encroaching, since the songs at the Ambassadors Theatre are an integral part of the entertainment. At what point, then, in sentimental balladry retrospectively considered does the heart-rending become the side-splitting? The matter isn't as simple as it sounds. It depends, I suggest, upon three factors: how old you are, the merit of the song weighed in the scale of fashion of its day, and its absolute merit.

Take these things in their reverse order. We all know the absolute merit of the past, and that whereas that piece of musical rubbish, "The Death of Nelson," abides our parody, an authentic gem like "Cherry Ripe" goes free. The matter of contemporary merit brings us up against things like the Mad Song in "Lucia." In the 'fifties this aroused no scepticism in Flaubert, who used the opera for one of his best chapters. It enchanted Emma Bovary in so far as she had attention for anything beyond the physical perfections of the tenor Lagardy, that admirable charlatan equally compounded of hairdresser and toreador. "La salle craquait sous les bravos; on recommença la strette entière; les amoureux parlaient des fleurs de leur tombe, de serments, d'exil, de fatalité, d'espérances, et quand ils

poussèrent l'adieu final, Emma jeta un cri aigu, qui se confondit avec la vibration des derniers accords." Yet to us to-day the opera is so much crinolined nonsense, and you cannot burlesque it better than by singing it seriously.

In the matter of one's age there are fortunately two illustrations on lower levels about which there can be no disputing. To the war-generation "Keep the Home Fires Burning" and "If You Were the Only Girl" must still be the arch-precipitants of manly tears. But can it be doubted that in some fifty years' time the helpless iteration of the one melody and the sempiternal waggle of the other will be legitimate fun-fodder?

Now apply this to the songs of the 'sixties and ask at what point you cry for the song's sake or for laughter's. Do you explode at "Won't You Buy My Pretty Flowers?" Do you at "Silver Threads Among the Gold" hilariously howl? Do you at the first strains of "Ever of Thee" catch your neighbour a jocund dig in the ribs? These three songs are presented at the Ambassadors as being exquisitely funny, which is exquisitely right from my grandson's point of view and exquisitely wrong from mine. This for the reason that none of these things has absolute merit, though pretty enough in its day, wherefore they will not delight my grandson, though I am old enough to have had them crooned over me in my bassinet.

I insist, further, that just as you cannot burlesque Donizetti, so you cannot by tomfoolery make these songs quainter than they inherently are. Quaintness is in the eye of the beholder. It is subjective, not objective. It is a relationship. Whence it follows that to an audience of differing ages and associations the same song will have a hundred differing degrees of quaintness. Whence it further follows that consciously to stress one degree of quaintness is to imperil all the others. In other words, the only way to satisfy every shade of perceptive quaintness is to sing the song as the composer intended it and with the seriousness of its period, and leave the oddity to the listener in whom the oddity is.

Mr. Sydney Carroll, who presents "The Streets of London," appears to have grasped this nettlesome question with something less than maximum firmness. In a programme note he tells us that he has sought to provide at once a performance of the play and a comment on its period, and I submit that this double-barrelled and mutually destructive feat could have been accomplished only in one way, that is by performing the play with complete seriousness and every hint of burlesque rigorously abjured whereby the play may be supposed to do its own commenting. But let the production attempt conscious comment by so much as a hair's-breadth of exaggerated emphasis and the play as a play no longer exists. In the theatre we are all children, and no pater-familias can hope to make Father Christmas convincing if he draws the cloak aside to let the children see how amusingly Papa is doing it.

The programme note tells us that "it would not be possible to stage a play by Boucicault or his contemporaries with any hope that a modern audience would receive it seriously." But surely this depends upon what audience? Is it seriously contended that Mr. Tod Slaughter and his company could not to-day produce "The Colleen Bawn" or "The Shaughraun" seriously and with perfect conviction in the south suburbs at the Elephant? I will even make a modest wager that Mr. Sam Livesey could make the right audience hiss his villain, again to quote the programme, "with the old simple-hearted hatred of personified wickedness," and that his fellow-actors would be equally successful in provoking laughter "in the same places and for the same reasons as Boucicault intended."

What the programme means is that this play seriously acted has lost its appeal for a sophisticated audience. I wonder. In such cases each playgoer must speak for himself. Speaking for myself I am still prepared to cry at the old play, and in the scene in which Mr. Valentine Rooke, starving in the snow, jettisoned burlesque and put back Boucicault I was genuinely moved. Further, I

have a natural antipathy to having my sense of humour prodded, and when anybody tells me that I shall think a story wildly funny that story has already failed.

These personal explanations are necessary because no amount of good-will towards Mr. Carroll, or anybody else whom I love dearly, is going to make me declare my reactions to a play to be other than they are. Guessing at other people's reactions, and judging from the play's audible and visual reception, I should say that "The Streets of London" is an immense success; and I hereby concede to the management liberty and leave to quote the words "immense success" on the largest hoarding without qualification. If objective mockery be considered permissible, then I would say that the most careful balance has been struck and the line between performance and comment precisely and intelligently determined.

Mr. Livesey's Gideon Bloodgood abounds in his own sense exactly as Walkley would have had him do. His villainy is as much too rich as his hands are too much beringed. "Hear me! I gloat," said Mr. Kipling's youthful rascals, and you can hear the conscious gloating in the least of this hoary villain's tones. Even when he has no words there is still the baleful rhetoric of his eye, and with the assistance of the limelight-man this clever actor turns the drama that Boucicault made to a green thought in a green shade. There is another lovely performance by Miss Sydney Fairbrother, whose acting in this piece would have provided Charles Lamb with a whole essay on relicts. The ringlets, the cameo brooch in which we sense the hair of the departed, the drooping form and uplifted eye, the hands ever seeking the urn about which to drape themselves—the whole figure has that alabaster suggestion which makes you, the spectator, turn it into the most wicked, the most heartless lampoon.

As Lucy, Miss Diana Churchill displays what good Sir Walter calls that "fragility of mind amounting almost to feebleness" which endeared that other Lucy to her Edgar, and which by some odd trick of biological

legerdemain went with a capacity to mother sons of the bull-dog breed. There is about this actress and this performance the exact atmosphere of those "keepsakes" which Emma borrowed and read surreptitiously in her convent dormitory. Miss Margaretta Scott does delightfully as the heinous Alida, and Miss Clare Greet is duly fat, good-natured, and breathless as Mrs. Puffy. As Puffy, Mr. Andrew Leigh throws a benevolent chest, and as the iniquitous Duke of Calcavella Mr. Arthur Brander rolls the eye and twirls the moustache of the best du Maurier period. I am in a little difficulty about Mr. Harold Warrender's Hon. Mark Livingstone, since here the tone is whole-hearted burlesque, though this is not to deny playing of considerable skill.

From my own point of view I could wish that any hint of parody should disappear. Accepting Mr. Carroll's key of burlesque, I still suggest that the introduction of the *pas de quatre* into the bridal scene is wildly wrong. The whole point of burlesque is to reproduce what another age did and show how funny it seems to us now. But I do not believe that there was any period in the English stage at which in this or any other melodrama a bride and her bridesmaids would pick up their skirts in profane exhilaration within five minutes of departing for Church.

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## CONCERNING PANTOMIME

*Hippodrome.*

*Thursday, December 29, 1932.*

"DICK WHITTINGTON"

*Daly's.*

*Tuesday, December 27, 1932.*

"MOTHER GOOSE"

*Scala.*

*Monday, December 26, 1932.*

"ROBINSON CRUSOE"

CLEARING our minds of cant, let it be said that the London pantomime has never been a patch upon its provincial brother, a fact which would have been recognised æons ago but for the astounding pathos of Dan Leno and the fatness of unfunny Herbert Campbell. I may know nothing about Plautus, and Mr. Carroll will aver that I know less about parody. But I would defend my knowledge of provincial pantomime, with which I first made acquaintance exactly fifty years ago. I remember the first appearance of Lily Elsie at Manchester in 1897 in the title-rôle of Little Red Riding Hood. I remember Phyllis Dare's appearance in the same town and part in 1900. This was at the Royal, while over the way in the same year George Graves appeared as the Emperor of China in "Aladdin." I can just recall Bessie Bellwood, Bessie Bonehill, and that female Atlas, Harriet Vernon.

Manchester was always fortunate in its Principal Boys, of whom the best, in my considered opinion, was Maggie Duggan. This great artist not only knew her job, but knew what her job was, which is something the present-day chit wearing her dimples at the wrong end knows nothing at all about. In the galaxy were Ada Reeve, Ada Blanche,

and Queenie Leighton, all of whom not only played the game but knew what it was about. Thereafter the bel canto of the flesh became a tuneless rhapsody of spirit. The comedians of those days came not in single spies, but in battalions. Thus I have seen in one and the same pantomime George Robey and George Graves; G. P. Huntley and George Graves; Malcolm Scott and Eugene Stratton; Little Tich and the Sisters Levey. Remember, too, that to a great pair of comedians would be added a great Principal Boy, and if you are the right period you will realise that those were the days!

Decay, or at any rate change, in the matter of the Principal Boy began when the curtain first rose on "Peter Pan." Henceforth the strapping thigh, sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, wilted to nothing, and the rollicking lay gave place to mawkish ballads about megrims. Take those songs which have to be sung by Miss Fay Compton at the Hippodrome. They may be very good songs. But the point is that they are drenched with as much melancholy as if they came out of Delius's "Brigg Fair," and I should not like to print what Maggie Duggan would have said if she had been invited to let the gallery have them. How Miss Compton gets the better of these crooning, sagging, maudlin dithyrambs I cannot tell, because on the night of my visit to the Hippodrome she was indisposed and did not appear. Nor can I tell what kind of Principal Boy she makes, though I must surmise that he is a wistful, eerie, fey Dick Whittington, like Mary Rose in trews. Turning up things which have been said in this column about this charming actress, I find that I have been so far moved out of reason as to find analogies in lambs grazing above Rydal Water, distant waterfalls, and elves weeping under the moon.

But there is little that is lamb-like about Prince Charming, who should be driving a coach-and-four down the Duke of York's steps. Neither can you, with riding-whip or anything else, slap a distant waterfall, and the last thing a Principal Boy, my school, should be like is an elf weeping

under anything. Now either Miss Compton is a Principal Boy of the old style or the new. If of the old style, then she is that extraordinary genius the artist who, having consistently stood for one set of qualities, now stands forth as the embodiment of their antithesis. If she is of the new style, then obviously we have to welcome the exquisite substitution of something else.

Alas, too, that on this occasion Mr. Leslie Henson, "through swallowing emery-paper at Christmas," must confess to almost total loss of voice. Yet, as Stevenson very nearly said, a spirit goes out of the man who means execution which outlives laryngitis and other untimely interruption. But there are pleasures other than aural, and it was sheer delight first to mark the disgust on Idle Jack's countenance when somebody proposed that he should look for work, and then in our own minds to fill out the bellying sail of his emphatic: "Don't be so *utterly* absurd!" One conjectures, too, that the book is not wholly untitled, and, following the manner of your Shakespeare commentator, I shall attribute to Mr. Henson the remark on being sacked: "And may I ask the reason, if it isn't a rude *answer*?"

I speak with diffidence of Mr. Tom Newell's Martha, who, with a mask exactly like Tenniel's Carpenter, has every attribute of your pantomime Dame except the essential one of being comical. I could sense the audience admiring Mr. Newell's art, but unless my ears deceived me, there was never the roar which goes with side-splitting. There can, however, be no two opinions about Mr. Johnny Fuller's Cat; whoso holds that there could be a better Cat lies, and whoso thinks there can be as good risks lying.

There was at least one other absentee on this unfortunate evening wherebysome acrobatics, which I hear are wonderful, could not take place. Also, one of the six Catherine wheels which formed the apex, apogee and apotheosis of the whole affair refused to work, as against which the Plaza Tiller Girls performed miracles of alignment, while

it would be heresy not to acclaim in Beam's Babes some two dozen geniuses in embryo. At least, that is what their parents, who all sounded as though they were present, probably thought of each of them while throwing scorn on the other twenty-three. It is only fair to add that, with Miss Compton restored to the firmament and the return of Mr. Henson's normal voice, the show will be some 200 per cent. better than one could suppose it on Thursday night.

No reservations of any kind are, however, to be made for "Mother Goose." This is the first pantomime ever staged at Daly's, and it is also the only pantomime I have ever seen in London which at all approaches provincial rank. There is about it what Mr. Curdle called "a completeness, a kind of universal dovetailedness, a sort of a general oneness" in all that should constitute a pantomime. Miss Cora Goffin—heavenly and Dickensian name!—is the Principal Boy here, and though the flesh is a little weak the spirit is indubitably willing. Miss Goffin has looked upon principal and boyish majesty, and at least knows what it should be if she cannot quite reproduce it.

But the thing that makes this pantomime is the astonishing genius—and I do not think the word too strong—of Mr. George Lacy, in my view as entertaining a Dame as Huntley and the lawful successor, lustres hence, to Robey. I do not know where Mr. Lacy comes from, or how old he is or isn't, or anything at all about him. I only know that he has the gift of making an audience laugh without reason, which is the best kind of laughter, since every member of the audience must join in it. Even those blighted mug-wumps who cannot smile till Bergson has ratified the occasion must capitulate and laugh at this effortless droll, who has taken care, moreover, to supplement drollery with high technical accomplishment. The number of things a pantomime Dame can do is limited, and perhaps cannot now be added to; Mr. Lacy brings a new virtuosity to them all, and perhaps his skill is best shown in this—that he can amuse in an impersonation of a Fairy Queen without descending to the idiom of

effeminacy. There is a chubby, likeable quality about a comedian whom, on the whole, I take to be young, though in discovering him I am probably declaring that of which the provinces have known for years. Such is Metropolitan nitwittery.

The subject of Miss Ella Retford is to be approached with awe, since she embodies both the Grand Style and Perpetual Youth. "What makes a Principal Girl a good one, in the judgment of special connoisseurs of pantomime, is a mystery hidden from mere common playgoers. When and where Principal Girls should be pert and when and where refrain from pertness; how close they should come to being what the uninstructed might call minxes and yet how they should differentiate themselves from minxes in the eyes of the experts; to how many affairs of the heart they should make lyric reference while adhering like gum, in their prose passages, to their respective Sindbads, Princes Charming, and Little Boys Blue—all these are deep and hidden things, for ignorance of which, let us trust, we shall not be rebuked, as à Kempis says, at the day of judgment. But, going simply by last night's applause, we should guess that a competent committee of bloods would mark Miss Retford's Ruby *alpha plus*."

The above, which I would give my ears to have written, was dashed off by Montague on a snowy; pre-war Christmas Eve. It shall stand without alteration for Miss Retford's Robinson Crusoe, since, in pantomime, sex is what the Mad Hatter would describe as much of a muchness. This first-class artist is well supported in a very charming show.

## DEVIL'S DINNER-PARTY

*Palace.*

*Friday, January 6, 1933.*

### "DINNER AT EIGHT"

A Play. By George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber

THE Devil whispered behind the leaves: "It's pretty, but is it Art?" This play is a mighty jolly way of spending an evening, though at the elbow of some of us who write about it sits a critical little devil piping away at the old question which, fortunately, is easily answered. "Dinner at Eight" is not a work of art for two very simple reasons, one mechanical and the other chemical, to go back to the idiom of the science lab. at school. It is not a work of art because there is no particular reason why Millicent Jordan should have invited these, and only these, ten people. This play's characters depend upon nothing more than the leaves in Mrs. Jordan's dining-table, and there is nothing to prevent the hostess from doubling or halving the number she first thought of. But could you double or halve the characters in "The Wild Duck," "Macbeth," "Charley's Aunt"? Try it and see. That is the mechanical reason.

Nor can one ask what the story amounts to because this play has no story, the dinner-party being a mere point of assembly for all the storyettes of which it is composed. And since every work of art must have a total gesture, in other words "mean something," we are entitled to ask, What is the sum of these storyettes? What, being taken together, do they mean? The answer is nothing, in the sense that a column of print reporting a railway accident, a fashionable wedding, a cricket match, and last night's concert does not "mean" anything, though the reader may

be vitally interested in each item. The authors may allege a unity in the fact that the smiling bosoms of Mrs. Jordan's guests are so many seething cauldrons. But we know before the curtain goes up that appearances are deceptive and that cupboards have skeletons. No! "Dinner at Eight" is no more a work of art than any play or film is likely to be which exploits the floating population of hotels, railway-trains, Turkish baths, or other fortuitous caravanserai. That is the chemical reason.

Having satisfied our plaguy little devil on this point, we will now go on to tell him that this work of non-art is not even pretty, that on the contrary it is ugly and hugely exciting. Mrs. Jordan has collected a first-class set of skeletons at her feast, grinning in full mediæval horror and rattling away like anything. Her own house is not without its grisly allowance. Her husband is going to die of heart disease either before or after bankruptcy; her daughter, having been seduced by a drunken and derelict film-star who commits suicide, will shortly be having a little skeleton of her own. Packard, the noisy giant crook who is going to ruin Jordan, lives in connubial misery with one of those deliriously common creatures that Nature appears to have copied from the film. Kitty Packard repays bullying by flirting, or worse, with her doctor, whose wife takes a scornfully charitable view of the situation. There is trouble in the Jordan kitchen where the chauffeur has his face slapped by the housemaid who prefers the married butler. And doubtless there would be skeletons among the Tzigane Band hired by Mrs. Jordan, and in the flat above the Jordans', and in the flat below, and in the flat on each side, and in the cupboards of Mrs. Jordan's butcher, baker and caviare-supplier, if Mr. Kaufman and Miss Ferber had cared to add these leaves to Mrs. Jordan's table.

Perhaps this is the place to make the point that this objection is not purely academic. The absence not of selection but of the principle of selection does definitely affect one's pleasure, in the way that one is affected in

wading through the interminable catalogues of Walt Whitman.

- you tramguards, plyers of pick and shovel, lavatory-attendants, railroad shunters and signalmen!
- you scullions, lamplighters, cotton-pickers, sheet-iron workers!
- you goldbeaters and hammerers on anvils!
- you compositors, proof-readers, editors sitting aloft in your chairs, and you craven wretches bringing late copy, trembling, three steps at a time!
- you parcel-makers, lorrymen, drivers of engines speeding North!

Who, when Whitman yaups as I have pretended, does not at once realise that the more ground he covers the less interesting he makes each little bit? The world is full of a number of things, and so is the film to which medium this piece essentially belongs. But a play is or should be something else, since its æsthetic may be summed up in the phrase: The fewer, the higher.

For all that, it was an excellent evening made noteworthy by the wholly admirable pace of the acting, which was in marked contrast to the funereal deliberation of the evening before. Mr. Kaufman is a doctor not only of plays but of production, and so has realised that nothing exasperates the playgoer more than wishing that the actors would get on with it. On Friday night Miss Irene Vanbrugh set the pace valiantly, her Mrs. Jordan being a capital imitation—not so much of an American hostess as of Miss Ruth Draper imitating an American hostess. Our English player is perhaps too full-blooded for this purely American featherhead. But Miss Vanbrugh kept it up and had plenty of steam left for the explosion when the English lord and lady, in whose honour the party was given, defaulted. One sympathised with her annoyance; the dinner-party was obviously the important thing—her daughter should have had her spot of bother, and her husband died, hereafter.

Mr. Tristan Rawson enveloped Jordan with more seriousness than there is in America, and Miss Margaret Vines gave Paula Jordan a pathos which would have been unbearable if she had not also invested her with a pinched



enunciation that was intolerable. Miss Vines must at once set about to remedy this, since the fault is so excruciating as to threaten her whole career. Mr. Lyn Harding gave a meticulous study of an American magnate in unglossy mood, and a sidelight upon that always astonishing country was vouchsafed when we realised that Packard washed his face *after* putting on his dress-waistcoat.

Miss Carol Goodner was dazzlingly brilliant and looked lovely as that bedizened piece of nastiness, Kitty Packard. Here is an extremely clever actress whose impersonations are impersonations and not mere showings of Miss Goodner under this or that label. She gives to each part its exact value in relation to the play, and according to the play will either let you merely sense her presence or thrust it on you with Hollywood voltage. There was a scene in which she and Mr. Harding told each other where they got off, encyclopædically and with a wealth of pertinent illustration. This delighted the house immensely, and indeed it was afforded the rare spectacle of two artists with the bit between their teeth refusing to bolt. Here Mr. Kaufman must be given credit for allowing two brilliant players to know when they have done enough.

Miss Laura Cowie amused vastly as an actress in grandiose decadence and present devotion to a woolly bundle which my left-hand neighbour opined to be a toy Peke, while my right-hand neighbour favoured a marmoset. As the film star thudded to earth and drunkenly asprawl thereon Mr. Basil Sydney played with fine imagination and power, though the performance which was nearest to reality and least like acting was that of the American actor, Mr. David Burns, in the part of the little film and theatre agent who despite abuse stands by his client. This was a perfect picture of a mongrel's resource and faithfulness, though as this is the first time one has seen Mr. Burns it is impossible to say how much of the performance is art. I shall therefore just declare that it was a perfect piece of something which may turn out to have been acting.

And now, with Mr. Cochran's leave, I propose to write a play about the Chelsea Arts Ball. The first scene will see ten thousand Chelsea artists queueing up to buy their tickets, while the rest of the play will show the means by which those ten thousand have come by the necessary guineas. For title I have chosen "Headache at Seven." The play will not mean anything or be a work of art. But it will make a lot of money, and Hollywood, which has never heard of Chelsea or any of the arts, will eat it as a film.

## MAKING HAY AT THE HAYMARKET

*Haymarket.*

*Thursday, January 12, 1933.*

### "DOUBLE HARNESS"

A Play. By Edward Poor Montgomery

ANYBODY who wants to know in a sentence about the week's two plays had better look up "A Grammarian's Funeral." For the benefit of readers in Wick or Sark who find my allusions too recondite, let me explain that in this poem Browning says that the man who fails in a big thing is chalks better than the man who brings off a little one. By rights I should first discuss the Irish play at the Arts Theatre, but am not doing so for two reasons. First, because the arts and their theatres must be taught their place, which is that of the handmaid to commerce, in this case the business of entertainment, and second, because Mr. Paul Vincent Carroll has no sense of what West End playgoers want to see and hear in their playhouses. His piece actually centres in an idea, and what is worse an idea of some nobility, while the women's most extravagant frock costs no more than six nineteen eleven, and the men, instead of being drawing-room lechers, are mere pot-house ecstasies. No, "Things that are Cæsar's" is definitely not one of the things that are the Haymarket's, and I will now get on with the job of finding out what these are.

Sybil Livingstone (Miss Mary Ellis) wanted to marry John Rockingham (Mr. Owen Nares) for five reasons—because he was a good-looker, because he was a rising barrister with a promising political future, because he had the reputation of a Cellini, a Casanova, and a Comte de Tilly all combined, because she looked like getting left. Last, because her younger sister Valerie (Miss Iris Ashley)

had hooked Denis Moore (Mr. R. Littledale), who, though not much of a young man, was still a man and young. But Rockingham refused to be limed, whereupon Sybil hit upon the notion of being caught in flagrant delight, as the schoolboy ought to have howled.

She had been Rockingham's mistress for three months without marriage appearing to be noticeably nearer, and in despair she resorted to a trick which as a thick-thinking male I deem to have been lacking in magnanimity. Slipping into Rockingham's pyjamas, she sent the simple fellow into the bathroom for a glass of cold water, and telephoned sister Valerie to tell her father the Colonel (Mr. Cecil Parker) that, if he cared to come round, he would find her inside Rockingham's slumber-wear. So the silver-polled martinet duly appeared with the hairs of his moustache bristling like quills upon the fretful porpentine. Did Rockingham intend to make an honest woman of his daughter, or didn't he?

Now barristers are notoriously shy theatre-goers, which they rightly explain on the grounds that they find the Courts more amusing. Anyhow, one concluded that this particular barrister had never seen "Magda," for by reversing a famous riposte and asking whether to marry one little dear would be fair to all the others, he could have defeated the man of battles. However, he missed the boat, and failing to get away on the good ship "Heimat," found himself adrift on the lugger of chivalry with the girl inescapably his. Whereupon they married and, to put it with Pinerotic refinement, from the day of their marriage became as strangers to one another. But Sybil slaved for her man, and made a success of him, and pretended not to know that he was carrying on with the deplorable Monica Paget (Miss Sara Sample). And all went merrily as other people's wedding-bells until sister Valerie, who had overrun her dress-allowance and was unable to get any more money out of Sybil, went to Rockingham and told him of Sybil's trick. "Is it true?" Rockingham asked Sybil, and Sybil answered "Yes." "Were you passionately in love

with me?" asked Rockingham. And Sybil said "No," hoping the big goose would gather from her trembling upper lip that out of mothering him that passion which all women want all plays and books to be about had been born.

But Rockingham, who exhausted his guessing powers in the daily cross-word puzzle, gathered nothing of the sort, and jumped at Monica's proposal that he should abandon his career and fly with her to Spain, the Riviera, Egypt, though one could not help thinking that that lady's vowel-sounds would be more at home at Margate. So somewhere about ten o'clock Sybil caught Rockingham up at Monica's flat and let him have it. Why, if she was heartless, had she bothered about his pettifogging briefs and piffing politics? Why, if she was a mercenary baggage, did he suppose she had turned herself for three years into a household drudge, saving money for him and spending none on herself? What did he darned well think she darned his socks for? Now there are some points of logic that even a lawyer can be made to see, and about eleven o'clock Rockingham saw this one, and everybody made or looked like making speeches, and everybody else said the Haymarket had got a success at last.

What is a Haymarket success? I suggest ineluctable tragedy averted by the social tact of well-dressed protagonists supremely unconcerned until menials have closed the doors of sumptuous apartments, and even in privacy exhibiting only as much distress as the county considers well-bred. Or you might put it that while your kitchen-maid would have been hopelessly flummoxed by the happenings in the pot-house at the Arts Theatre there was no sentiment uttered in the Haymarket's drawing-room, study, boudoir, which she would not have exactly comprehended and endorsed. She would not have perceived what went on in the souls of Mr. Carroll's characters, whereas she would have perfectly appreciated what went on in the bodies of Mr. Montgomery's.

Everything that happened in the Irish play was squalid

except the thinking; there was no squalor in the English piece, where all the linen that was publicly washed consisted of dress shirts.

Did the piece scream to Heaven with its improbabilities? Yes and no. Yes, if we had thought about them, and no, because we were too busy watching people paying morning visits and afternoon calls and trooping in to dinner never looking less than spick and often more than span. That matter for theatrical perturbation should be inconceivable does not worry me. I do, however, think that a barrister who engages to spend the next day defending a manslaughter case at Yarmouth should not be found taking tea in London without some explanation, and I think it strange that Bury St. Edmunds should have no motor-cars for hire. Nobody looks to find the eternal verities sprouting from the Aubusson carpets of this tasteful theatre. But I think that within its own convention the most foolish piece should hang together.

Talking of carpets, I was vastly amused by the scenery of Mr. Aubrey Hammond, who appeared to have given himself *carte blanche*. The Livingstones' sitting-room was excellent. But Rockingham's rooms, to which, given this particular barrister, we looked forward as a combination of athlete's den and hedonist's sanctum, looked exactly like the kind of palace at which reigning empresses might be supposed to attend for pedicure. The Rockinghams' drawing-room was rightly very fine and very large. But a nice point occurred in connection with Monica's boudoir, which was highly and realistically modern, though with an impressionist view of London glimpsed through the windows. Surely this was wrong? The part, though smaller than the whole, remains a part of that whole, and if we were supposed to look at the outside world through Mr. Hammond's eyes we ought to have looked at this inner bit of it through his eyes also. In other words, if London was to be impressionist, the boudoir should have been impressionist also, with scrawls and scribbles stuck around to suggest that here might be a

console and there a mantelpiece. By this means everything that the eye took in would have been a part of Mr. Hammond's vision. As it was, we saw a real room set in an unreal world, which was a jumble of two planes. Or was the view of London supposed to be a decoration *pasted* on the window and not deceiving Monica? This would have been in excellent order. My argument only holds if Monica thought she was looking at the real thing and we knew she wasn't. Think it out for yourselves.

The piece was brilliantly acted, except that Mr. Nares, deft and exquisite comedian though he is, did not suggest the man of many loves. As soon as this actor appears on the stage cricket similes spring to the mind. Here is the world's straightest bat, a Quixote who would apologise to the wicket-keeper for causing him to lose sight of the ball, and if an umpire wrongly gave him in incontinently run himself out. This is the only kind of incontinence we can associate with this impeccably flannelled Galahad who would be our first choice in any dramatisation of "Venus and Adonis." This apart, and given that he also looked fifteen years too young even for a rising barrister, Mr. Nares played with extraordinary contrivance and resource.

As for Miss Ellis, she reduced me at her first entrance to a state of dithering adulation in which I remained for the rest of the evening. She was perfect, and why paint the lily? Miss Cecily Byrne as Sybil's friend added to the general enchantment; Miss Isobel Ohmead as a Personage's wife queened it on the sofa with the self-possession of an unusually regal swan; and finally that good actor Mr. Cecil Parker got out of the difficult part of the heavy parent, period about 1880, by being very careful to do almost nothing at all. He had to make us overlook the Colonel, since to have caught sight of him would have plunged the whole thing into bathos. A kindly veil shall be drawn over one or two other players who were not so successful in getting themselves overlooked.

## ENIGMA WITH VARIATIONS

New.

Thursday, February 2, 1933.

### "RICHARD OF BORDEAUX"

A Play. By Gordon Daviot

THE second Richard was, says the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "slight, fair-haired, beardless, with rounded face and elegant but rather feminine features." Having looked the effeminate King full in his beardless face, this respectable authority then declares that his character must remain an enigma to the historian. J'ever hear such hypocrisy?—as my Lord Castlewood might have said. The "strange mixture of strength and weakness, courage and irresolution, indolence and energy" constitute an enigma only in the sense that none are so blind as those who will not see, and that the leavened loaf is inexplicable to the baker who denies the existence of leaven.

Richard's character is proclaimed in letters a mile high by that Smithfield exploit in which as a lad of fifteen he rode alone into the mob whose leader had been killed and induced it to follow him. This feat in itself connotes feminine intuition as well as male courage, and is exactly what Joan of Arc would have done in the circumstances. But the exploit is in two parts, since after Richard had tamed the mob there was the effort made by his troops to come to his aid, refused by the young man as much out of coquetry as strategy. He had charmed the crowd, and as its charmer he intended to return to London.

Now Shakespeare, who *pace* Mr. Shaw was neither a fool nor a humbug, probably knew as much as the *Encyclopædia Britannica* about Richard. He certainly knew about



his friend's play of "Edward II," a King whose character has never presented any riddle even to an historian. From which we may take it that Shakespeare was perfectly well aware how many abnormal beans make five. But knowing his audience to be still drunk with the virility of that Armada-thwacking age, he may have anticipated Mr. Ivor Brown's view that to some spectators even a hint of the epicene theme can be "irreparably distasteful."

Yet unless his Richard was to be a complete fake the effeminacy had still to be suggested, and this Shakespeare achieved by diverting the stream of Richard's character into the channel of preciosity and æstheticism which are effeminacy's co-ordinates. Something of the foregoing must be in the mind of any spectator who is not going to find Miss Daviot's Richard wholly enigmatic, and all of it was obviously in the author's mind since she has created a Richard who, in this light, at once becomes wholly understandable.

The play opens with Richard in his teens already exhibiting intelligence beyond his years, and opposing his uncles who would still be war-mongering because that is the beefy English tradition. Mr. Gielgud confronts his Council with a high impertinence, the character having previously established likeableness in a delightful five minutes of affection with his Queen and bonhomie towards two pages caught at the medieval equivalent of pitch-and-toss. The same night sees the young King plunged into high passion at the attempt of the nobles to overrule the little authority he actually possesses. The whole of this act is a brilliant essay in the reconstruction of a period and should be a lesson to those who object that they are not interested in fourteenth-century politics. Nobody asks them to be. The point is that the spectacle of living men in desperate conflict enthralled whether the matter of that conflict be rival kingdoms or papal authority or silk duties.

The second act shows Richard in intellectual sympathy and partnership with the Queen, who must now die of the

plague. Here is the place to say succinctly that if Miss Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies is not the best actress in England there is certainly none better. Her performance is a little miracle of sensitive perception; she creates the woman and sets her in her period as definitely as she created Mrs. Herbert and set her in the age of Victoria and, since critical memory is long, created and rightly dated that Egyptian kitten, Cæsar's Cleopatra.

A year or two now pass, which brings us to the famous quarrel between Henry of Lancaster and Thomas Mowbray with which every schoolboy is familiar. The third act deals with Richard's downfall, which his power of self-dramatisation enables him to enjoy. It is not, however, Miss Daviot's purpose to harp on another playwright's note, and the relish she gives Richard is not that of defeat-savouring but of preserving irony and wit in the face of disaster. Richard, with the horrors of Pontefract Castle looming in front of him, can still make Bolingbroke feel a fool, and his rebuke of Canterbury is masterly and royal. The play ends quietly with the King taking leave of his faithful secretary, beautifully played by Mr. Richard Ainley.

There is a really magnificent cast, and Messrs. Eric Stanley, Frederick Lloyd, Francis Lister, H. R. Hignett, Ben Webster, Henry Mollison, Donald Wolfit, Reyner Barton, George Howe, Kinsey Peile and Walter Hudd will not take offence at this barest mention in a very full week. Sufficient to say that as a team they exhibit the greatest loyalty to their author and to each other, together with that skill which makes the loyalty worth while. I should hate to single out any one performance, and must therefore say nothing about Mr. Stanley's harsh and commanding Gloucester. But the piece is and must be Richard's, and by his really superb performance Mr. Gielgud now makes it impossible for us to deny him some at least of the attributes of greatness; one is chary of the full title only because that must mean not the best of a poor lot but greatness as previous ages have understood it. Thew and

sinew are obviously denied this actor, and perhaps he will never play roaring Basanic bulls or any of the breed of those whom Stevenson liked to call ventripotents. But no actor that has ever lived has been omni-sided, and that kind of playing in which Mr. Gielgud is a master permits an actor to be great ten times over since it comprises nine-tenths of the human faculties.

Mr. Gielgud has long been known to possess the finer physical graces including that beauty of mask and voice and pose and gesture which are his by inheritance; known to possess, too, store of intellectual subtlety and temperamental fire. The point one has hitherto debated has been his capacity for the pathetic and his characters' staying power. These things are now cleared up. His last scene showed that he has command of simple pathos, and the whole matter was finally settled when we saw that though the part attained its climax, explosively considered, early in the first act the character could and did in Mr. Gielgud's hands increase in emotional momentum to the end, and this despite diminishing opportunities for virtuosity.

All the players came in for a tremendous ovation in which the play seemed strangely included. But it was foolish of me to use the word "strangely" since the only thing the West End objects to in a Shakespeare play is Shakespeare's part in it, a poetic handicap absent in the case of Miss Daviot's really fine achievement. The piece was beautifully mounted, and its appeal to the eye continuous. In fact, I am not sure that the exquisiteness of a production flowing like music did not give this work greater quality than it actually possesses. Whether Mr. Gielgud is wise to shoulder the double strain is another matter.

## THE PITOËFFS

Arts.

Thursday, February 16, 1933.

### "LA RONDE"

A Play. By Arthur Schnitzler  
French Translation by Suzanne Clauser

THE French have a taste for lecturing, and the English a dislike of it. Therefore it would have been a kindness to explain this to M. Pitoëff, who preceded this Viennese masterpiece with a twenty-five minutes oration whereby he eventually raised his curtain on a house seething with exasperation. It should also have been explained to M. Pitoëff that the audience at the Arts Theatre is not a collection of nasty-minded schoolboys and schoolgirls, but is made up of highly skilled playgoers who can be trusted to know a work of art from a tale of bawdry. Our *conférencier* insisted at enormous length that "La Ronde" is not a scabrous play, whereas a better point would have been that "La Ronde" is scabrous because certain facets of life are what puritans call scabrous, though to a generation which has ceased to muffle its piano-legs those facets are no more than natural.

Stendhal's well-known handbook lays it down that love is a matter of getting as closely as possible to the object desired and possessing it with every sense, whereas a later Fountain gushes forth the pellucid information that love is or ought to be a "perdurable hypostasis." Much virtue in "ought"! The trouble, of course, is the old matter of words, since it would be absurd to suppose that the word "love" has meant the same thing to Caligula and Calvin, Nero and Knox. But the misunderstanding has always been collective rather than individual. "Nature created the female and civilisation the feminine," said Balzac, and

the whole business of culture has been to invent a gloss for which Nature has seen no necessity. Yet some individuals still insist upon misunderstanding. Thus I find a distinguished colleague writing *à propos* of this play: "A serious inquiry into the nature of love cannot go hand in hand with propriety." Substitute "flippant" for "serious" and I agree.

This play consists of one anecdote told ten times over, and exhibits in each case the intoxicated gallop to passion and the sober retreat therefrom. This is the common experience of all whose youth has not, in Stevenson's phrase, been depressed by exceptional æsthetic surroundings, and it is probably the one universal experience about which most writers have been constrained to a false modesty. Yet there is a well-known Latin proverb built on this particular anti-climax, and it was not a disreputable poet who wrote:

Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;  
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;  
A bliss in proof—and prov'd, a very woe;  
Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream:  
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well  
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

"All this the world well knows." Yet forty years after Schnitzler wrote his play it declines to license the exhibition. Perhaps the most cruel thing about the piece is the continued lack of feminine comprehension in this matter, since every one of the ten scenes shows the woman continuing to chatter about heaven to the man entangled in his self-made hell.

There are five women in this play, a prostitute, a servant-girl, a *femme du monde*, a little dressmaker, and an actress, each of whom is seen first with one lover and then with another or her husband. The prostitute meets a sailor, who leaves her for a servant-girl dancing in a café. The servant-girl pretends to be seduced by a young man who has an affair with the *femme du monde*, who allows her husband to lecture her on the beauty of faithfulness, after

which he deceives her with the little dressmaker. The little dressmaker makes love to a famous dramatist, who has an episode with an actress, who grants favours to a count, who spends a night with the prostitute with whom the play began. And so the chain is complete.

The five women were played by Mme. Pitoëff, whose delineation of the varying social strata had the same sharpness of definition which a music-hall artist would have given it. If I fault her perfect mastery of this difficult business of instantaneous projection it is because I found her society woman a little too *bourgeoise* in the scene with her lover, which was perhaps too like Maupassant in his middle-class vein. To those who have known Mme. Pitoëff only in tragic rôles this series of characterisations must have come as a revelation of comic genius. In the scene in which the actress lured the dramatist into what looked like a houseboat and on pretence of the need for *campagne*, *pureté*, and all the rest of the Dumasian caboodle, though never ceasing to chatter about herself and her triumphs and bringing the scent of the footlights well into the hay—here Mme. Pitoëff maliciously suggested what I shall call the exotricks of Sarah Bernhardt framing her tousled mop in a window in pasteboard imitation of Roxane or Francesca. In the following tableau she showed equal malice in suggesting the ineffable bunk of a Duse speechlessly unhappy about bygone desertions but not letting present lover escape those tragic hands. Mme. Pitoëff is an actress who acts with her whole body, and whereas lesser talent would have tried to cram a quart of acting into this pint pot of a play, Mme. Pitoëff effortlessly extracted twice as much significance as Schnitzler can have intended. M. Pitoëff acted two parts with fine imagination, and there were two brilliant studies by M. Louis Salou.

Owing to the smallness of the stage, the complicated production was necessarily higgledy without being piggedly, and from time to time one had supererogatory glimpses of one scene-shifter in braces and another adjusting something or other with a boat-hook. However, the

theatre admittedly has its pictorial side, and this last desperate effort to retrieve a slipping sky had the charm of a Manet. All playgoers with any taste for something terrifically first-class should find themselves at the Arts Theatre during the next fortnight. But, of course, the play must be banned for all except specialised audiences. Harringay, using Miss Cicely Courtneidge's finest accent, is always entitled to put the question: "And what is this play about, may I h'ask?" A truthful answer would hardly exhale that propriety for which my colleague is so concerned.

*Arts.*

*Wednesday, February 22, 1933.*

### "MAISON DE POUPÉE"

Revival of Ibsen's play by the Compagnie Pitoëff  
French Translation by M. Prozor

THERE was an encouragingly large audience to welcome Mme. Pitoëff's Nora, that ninny-proof part in which not even an English ingénue could wholly fail but which only an actress of the first order can carry through completely. This is not the place for a full-dress review of all the Noras since antiquity, though perhaps Mr. Shaw's visit to the Great Wall of China might mark the favourable time.

To all of us who did not begin our play-going yesterday Janet Achurch is the criterion here, though I personally am under the handicap of not having seen her performance until it was ten years old. By that time Janet could no longer suggest the squirrel and the song-bird; she had acquired the drill-hall manner necessary to quell sparse audiences gathered by ones and twos in the bleak receptacles of Ibsen; and mind being governed by matter she now loomed before us Teutonically and like some Brunnhilde, redescended to earth to preach the gospel of the New Woman. As no bushel was ever made which could

eclipse Brünnhilde, so it was inconceivable that any piece of furniture in the home of a provincial bank-manager could occlude Janet in her elephantine game of hide-and-seek with the children. But this manner and the habit which it had compelled were of infinite service in the play's last act, where Ibsen's message becomes more momentous than his character, and the awakened chit must hurl the new gospel at a world in no way prepared to receive it.

Comparison with her great predecessor reveals both the strength and weakness of Mme. Pitoëff's performance. One says straight away that her first two acts, filled with a wealth of finesse and subtle invention, were better than anything Janet was physically able to give. She began to fail in the scene in which Dr. Rank reveals his tenderness, and her: "Let me pass, please!" to which Janet gave the knell of doom, went for nothing. In addition, Rank was on the wrong side of Mme. Pitoëff, so that she did not pass him, but merely moved away. Again the tremendous line about the sacrifice of honour: "Millions of women have done so!" was quite ineffective.

It is possible that Mme. Pitoëff's playing in the last act, though it seemed too small to us, was strictly correct, since so long ago as 1894 Mr. Allan Monkhouse asked whether it was possible "for a woman quite uneducated, with no training to distinguish fairly right from wrong, and who has at most a partial apprehension of conflicting ideas as a moral equipment, to emerge from all her prepossession under stress of the discovery of a husband's brutality, and to become a consistent and unimpeachable professor of the extremely modern and by no means instinctive opinions that are associated with Ibsen's name."

Forty years ago the delivery of the play's message must have seemed to Nora's exponents to be a moral obligation; now that the message is accepted an actress may be justified in presenting that young woman as individual and not as embodiment. It was right for Janet to feel that the banging of that door burst open all the others; it may be



equally right for Mme. Pitoëff to hold that she is concerned with Nora alone and not with a sex. Given this view the performance could hardly be faulted, and Nora's mask of rapt discovery as she crouched on the floor under the peltings of Torvald's denunciation was something at which to marvel.

In fairness to Mme. Pitoëff it should be stated that she was, in sporting phrase, out by herself—a handicap in a play which should be about a clash of forces. Helmer is a magnificent part for a fine actor, and you ought to feel that with his overthrow a mountain topples. M. Raymond Dagand made a molehill of him so that the play came to be about a child-husband instead of a child-wife. This is not to say that this young man acted unskilfully but that he was too young a man, presenting an effervescent egotism instead of mature crassness long in bottle. Again, M. Pitoëff's Dr. Rank lacked something of sombreness; one felt that the actor's mind was not always wholly in the part.

That brilliant young player, M. Louis Salou, presented Krogstad with great finish, though I have seen some worse actors give greater point to the seedy machinations of this blackmailer *malgré lui*. Mlle. Nora Sylvere achieved the almost incredible feat of interesting us in Mrs. Linden, the saddest piece of pastry which ever came out of the Norwegian oven. One quite hoped that she and Krogstad would be happy, a possibility which must have staggered the old man himself even while he was arranging it!

There is a lot to be said for these miserable spars of human wreckage, but then this is true of everybody in the play, and perhaps most of all of Helmer. To be in a position to refuse overdrafts to the smart set of Christiania, if any, only to be dogged at the bank by a Krogstad and beleaguered at home by a Dr. Rank and a Mrs. Linden, and to hear after a party that one's wife has committed forgery on one's behalf and expects one to take the blame to avert her suicide—Helmer's view of these cheerfulnesses is nowhere stressed by Ibsen, who was not concerned to excuse his character's perfectly natural peevishness.

## THE BATTLE OF BARRY JACKSON

March 19, 1933.

THE first thing to be said about Mr. G. W. Bishop's *Barry Jackson and the London Theatre* (Arthur Barker, 21s.) is that it is accurate and so well written that one does not notice the writing, handsomely printed and bound with distinction. It will look well on the drawing-room table, and is intensely readable, which is by no means the same thing. Its frontispiece shows Sir Barry Jackson looking "werry fierce," indeed unnecessarily so. The artist is Dame Laura Knight, and she has given her subject the apprehensive look of one who must take a running leap on to the back of one of her circus horses. Sir Barry has made such a leap, the animal in question being the London theatre; and perhaps one might construe his expression as rueful amazement. That leap was financially successful in one year out of ten, and then it was only *pour mieux reculer*. Why?

Sir Barry did not leave his waggon stuck in that boring rut which is the result of hitching it to one playwrighting star and one only; early in his venture he realised that there are evenings when the most fanatical Shavian does not feel up to another dose of diatribe about the Cosmos. In pursuit of variety Sir Barry has been a match for the music-hall. He has had his crazy months at Malvern with all of us critical gas-bags conveyed thereto in machines heavier than air. He has produced Celtic maunderings, the metaphysical gyrings and gimblings of Pirandello, German Expressionism, Old English Comedy, Shakespeare in modern dress, Tennyson in full Anglo-Saxon fig, the Cockney parlour, the later Shavian pudding but with the plum of "Saint Joan" snatched by somebody else, a

Devonshire masterpiece, a bit of Ibsen, something of French mysticism, what the wag called "The Wimpoles of Barrett Street," that unwaggish drama which did both Mr. Drinkwater and Abe Lincoln more than a bit of good, a Beverley Nichols firework, and a fiendishly clever, gall-soaked jeremiad by Mr. Maugham.

The result is that, financially speaking, Sir Barry's ventures have ended not in a head-on crash but in a highly unsatisfactory skid on the greasy London playground. If he had not been a very wealthy man his accountants would doubtless have advised him to put the brake on long ago, since it is the business of accountants to know about finance and not about motor-cars! Sir Barry Jackson's ten years in the theatre might be summed up in a drama entitled not "B. J. One" but "B. J. Minus One." Why?

This book invites us to look for the fault. Has it been in the plays, the acting, the business conduct of the venture? Or shall we look nearer home, meaning our home and not Sir Barry's? Let us take these in turn. The plays, as we have seen, make a goodly list, though on closer inspection some of the goodliness disappears. Mr. Shaw's later dramas are organ voluntaries relieved by diversions on something less than penny whistles, and that Mr. Shaw is unrepentant about this is proved by a sentence quoted from an interview with Mr. Bishop: "Shakespeare understood what I understand—if you put humour into a play it must be cheap humour." Mr. Bishop refrained from putting Sir Toby's: "Thy exquisite reason, dear knight?" realising perhaps that there are points in which Mr. Shaw and Sir Andrew are one. No reasonable person could have expected "For Services Rendered" to stand up against the misanthropy which made the picture too bad to be true, and it was always inconceivable that any considerable number of persons could want to see tricks played on Shakespeare, or Tennyson staged seriously. And, of course, there was far too much Phillpotts.

Of the acting there has been little to complain. Many

highly distinguished artists have appeared under Sir Barry Jackson's banner, though one could compile a long list of the popular players who have not, and, for want of the appropriate brains, could not appear at this theatre. Covering up as boxers do, I shall say that there has been a little too much Hardwicke and not enough Laughton, in fact, not any; while Sir Barry has shown too much loyalty in standing by one or two players on whose behalf nothing but loyalty could avail. In other words, from a financial point of view the plays have been too much the thing, and the players too little, always with the magnificent exceptions of Mesdames Edith Evans and Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies and Mr. Hardwicke at his best.

In the matter of the business running of this theatre I cannot express an opinion because all the facts are not before me. But I note that in a foreword Mr. Cochran contrasts Sir Barry's losses with his own certified net profit, in half the time, of £143,000. Mr. Cochran hints at lack of diversity, and suggests that Sir Barry might have done better with an occasional revue, a suggestion which a glance at the frontispiece should demolish! To be frank, I hold one of the causes of failure to be a certain dour and schoolmasterish interpretation of the word "entertainment." Mr. Cochran quotes the reason advanced by Mr. Bishop for failure, "the very heavy administrative expenses of a theatrical organisation maintaining so many necessary responsible employees on the permanent staff," and makes comparison with his own organisation, which consists of one manager, one stage-director, two lady-assistants, a secretary, two shorthand-typists, a telephone-girl, an office-boy, and himself. One draws the inference that in a multitude of counsellors there is not only wisdom but cost.

But is it not possible that the venture was damned financially the moment Sir Barry announced it as emanating from the Birmingham Repertory Theatre? Rightly or wrongly the British public distrusts the smear of repertory, and sees that smear even when the slate is clean.

Incidentally, it does not care that the slate is also empty. The British public from the box-office point of view can be divided into three sections—the brave intellectuals whose members are not enough to matter, the silly fashionables upon whom the stalls depend, and the wage-earners who although the backbone of the theatre cannot be its heart and lungs as well. The Birmingham origin has militated against this venture in this way, that whereas the excitement of a Cochran première is taken for granted, on the Barry Jackson first-night horizon edification looms.

Now, if there is one thing the British public distrusts it is edification, being in this respect the opposite of the American public, which adores uplift. The British public is not interested in the theatre in the way that Sir Barry and presumably the dramatic critics are interested. It takes no interest in the theatre except as a way of getting through an evening and as an agreeable alternative to dancing, tennis, motor-biking and pillion-riding, drinking, gambling, dog-racing, the pictures and holding hands thereat, loafing at street-corners and mooning about the house. This is the public which must ultimately decide the fate of any theatre, and if Sir Barry has not succeeded financially it is because this public has never wanted, does not want, and is not going to want in sufficient numbers a theatre in which plays are produced merely because they are works of art. There is no disgrace here; given the English temperament, not to love the theatre as foreigners love it is neither a crime nor a betrayal.

I am conscious that the foregoing is an inadequate review of a book of which the great virtues are its detachment and under-statement. Slobber and gush are easy when one has extraordinary sympathy; Mr. Bishop is unlike Cleopatra in that he knows not only what temperance may be, but what it is. Neither have I attempted anything in the nature of tribute to its subject, who is known throughout theatredom as a man of maximum integrity, enthusiasm, industry and taste. It has seemed to me that both man and book deserve better than empty compliment,

and one would help if one could. My suggestion is that Sir Barry Jackson should now take into partnership a man with a healthy dislike of art, no bowels, and a flair for the bad money-making play and the good money-making actor.

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## MILTON'S HIMSELF AGAIN

*Royalty.*

*Wednesday, March 22, 1933.*

### "FRANCIS THOMPSON"

A Play. By Jack de Leon

Francis Thompson was born to baffle the glib inference.—E. V. LUGAS.

It is a natural infirmity of your super-subtle actor to think that brain will lift him over any stile; the next step is to seek out exactly those parts which your non-intellectual player avoids by natural instinct. There is this to be said for stupidity, that it keeps an actor out of messes. It will restrain a natural Joseph Surface from flying at Charles, a beardless boy from rigging himself out as Prospero, and sometimes, but not always, it will prevent a Lear from playing the Fool. It is argued that this at least avoids the sin of casting to type, and one is reminded of how Galsworthy in, I think, one of Mr. Leon M. Lion's revivals turned down an actor because he was thirty-two and the character in "Loyalties" was thirty-four. In both cases the evil lies, as usual, in going to extremes.

This week we have a happy instance of the middle course. Every playgoer who has read Everard Meynell's "Life"—the mugging-up of which has been one of the week's critical obligations—must have known before he went to the theatre that Mr. Ernest Milton was the man for the part. It is long since I read Euclid, but I still remember that if he wanted to prove that one thing was equal to another he would first pretend that it wasn't. Let us then pretend that Mr. Milton is not the actor to play Francis Thompson. This involves looking round the stage for somebody who is, which again means deciding in our own minds the sort of man Thompson was. Perhaps

it will clear the ground if we agree that there is no necessity to decide how Miltonic a poet he was; the stuff speaks, or rather sings for itself. Nor are we, I take it, looking for physical resemblances. Thompson may or may not have looked like a tragic version of Harpo Marx, and his voice may or may not have been as high-pitched as Mr. Milton's—his biographer talks of the deep, tremulous voice he had in reading. These are not the things that matter. What does matter is the power to suggest a half-angel and half-bird turned by opium into half-demon and half-scarecrow. A being whose soul was not only, like George Herbert's, divinely loose about him, but untidily and aggravatingly so. A lord of language and, what is more, a master of the ideas behind it. Yet an infuriating lie-abed, who could not get up though he strewed his counterpane with texts printed in big capitals on pages torn from exercise-books: "Thy sleep with the worms will be long enough," and so on.

One has long suspected consistent unpunctuality to be the hall-mark of true genius, and Thompson was always ready to explain that his failure to keep appointments was due not to indolence but to "an insurmountable series of detaining accidents." He had the physical disabilities which attend the introspective; the wonder was not that when walking in the street he failed to take the right corner, but that in taking the wrong one he did not get run over. He was the sort which drops things, rumples newspapers, jags books while trying to cut them, and can be trusted to make a mess of whatever a child of seven can do competently. He himself admitted to childishness, but with a difference from other children:

There is a sense in which I have always been and even now remain a child. But in another sense I never was a child, never shared children's thoughts, ways, tastes, manner of life and outlook on life. I played, but my sport was solitary sport, even when I played with my sisters; from the time I began to read (about my sixth year) the game often (I think) meant one



thing to me and another (quite another) to them—my side of the game was part of a dream-scheme invisible to them. And from boys, with their hard, practical, objectivity of play, I was tenfold wider apart than from girls, with their partial capacity and habit of make-believe.

Here I must hope that the reader has made for himself some kind of mental image of what the poet looked like and thought. This is important, because we have to reconcile with this image the extraordinary notion of the poet as cricket-fan. Most people know the verses which begin :

It is little I repair to the matches of the Southron folk,  
Though my own red roses there may blow . . .

with its exquisite burden : "O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago !" Everard Meynell tells us how as a boy Thompson would go alone to a friend's garden and bowl at a net, which, of course, meant retrieving the ball after each delivery. He would continue in this back- and spirit-breaking task for hours, which, unless it is done for money and as a juggler must practise, proves genius or madness or both. There is even an account of him in later life playing cricket at Wormwood Scrubs, "dingy from boot-laces to hatband" and strapping on his pads "with fingers so weak that they were hurt by the buckle with which they fumbled." Though Thompson could write about cricket and had a passion for the game, he found a myriad excuses for never going to see it; he played mental cricket as others indulge in mental arithmetic.

What have we then in sum? To begin with, a very great poet, a very little child, a drug addict. After this we must continue with the cricketer, and, finally, take into account that which Alice Meynell wrote to Mr. Drinkwater approving a poem he had composed on Thompson: ". . . in spite of the fact that it flatters the usual ready-made idea that F. T. was a very unhappy man. He had three years of great misery, followed by

twenty of peace and plenty—no responsibilities, and an assurance of all the necessities and some few of the luxuries of life, whether he earned them or not. Add to this great joy in his work and in his security of immortality, and you would not wonder to see him the chirpy, chatty man he was." In view of this we may assume that, like Bunthorne, there was more innocent fun in Thompson than the popular picture of him allows us to suppose. Probably, like so many of us, he was two men in one, of which the poet was the man that mattered.

Mr. Milton's quality of chirpiness is not discoverable, and one does not easily believe that he could tell a Hornby from a Barlow. It is much if, like Lady Macbeth, though innocent of the knowledge he can still applaud the boundary hit. Lots of actors could give this side of Thompson without convincing us of his ability to compose so much as a verse for a Christmas cracker. I have no doubt that Thompson, apart from his drug-taking, was as harmless a fellow as Swinburne sober, and, again, there are scores of celebrities who can portray harmlessness. What the actor *must* suggest, and convincingly, even overpoweringly, at his first appearance and before he has opened his mouth, is the utter child who is also capable of the mighty line and the vast idea behind it. Mr. Milton makes this suggestion as I am convinced that no other actor on our stage could make it. When asked where he lives he replies: "In the tower of my own soul," and we believe him. A little girl asks him to write her a story, and he sets down the lines:

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.

And again, when Mr. Milton reads these aloud we believe him. This is because this actor, when he is not defying physical limitations, is a very fine actor indeed. When it comes to metaphysics, poetry, imaginative insight and nervous intensity including hint of the eerie

or touch of the fey, sheer artistry, and a few other trifles, Mr. Milton can make rings round our siphon-manipulators and cigarette-pedlars. In plain English, his Francis Thompson is a lovely performance, not the least spoiled by the fact that this is not precisely the actor one would send in first against Larwood. He is a very fine, perhaps our finest, exponent not of the leg theory of batting but of the head theory of acting.

Mr. Milton was ably assisted, provided they did not get in the way, by a talented company chosen presumably to give melodramatic body and comic interest to the entertainment so skilfully concocted by Mr. de Leon. Thompson was always at odds with his environment, and this being so it was obviously impossible to weave a play round him which should have artistic unity, at least on the surface. What Mr. de Leon wisely did was to place the poet in a setting reminiscent of "Trelawny of the Wells," which is rather like eating oysters and treacle tart off the same plate and simultaneously. As a playmaker he was solely concerned to deal with Thompson's affair with the little street-walker, and this again involved that young lady's friends and landlady. Miss Mary Glynne played Ann very nicely, though without indicating that spiritual and mystic something which made her take Thompson for brother and child. Miss Glynne possesses, as all playgoers know, great charm and gaiety, and though she worked hard and self-sacrificingly to dispel these she could not indicate those depths which the mere bodily presence on the stage of Miss Flora Robson or Miss Beatrix Lehmann effortlessly implies. There was a first-class piece of comic acting by Mr. Hay Petrie. Indeed, this was the better class of comic acting, since it gave to the sophisticated clown a touch of the moon.

Is the play a good play? There are some straight questions which cannot be given straight answers. I have expressed my opinion to the best of my ability, and the baffled reader is at liberty to draw what glib inference he may.

## 'A SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

*Playhouse.*

*Thursday, April 6, 1933.*

### "THE RATS OF NORWAY"

A Play. By Keith Winter

An actor distinguishes himself in a part that suits him, and is warmly praised for a remarkable performance. He plays another part in which he is not suited, whereupon his friends execrate the very name of the critic.—  
CLEMENT SCOTT.

WHEN the curtain did not go up on this play and, instead, the house was plunged into a darkness intensified by Nordic wailings, the audience—or some of us—succumbed to the gloomiest prognostications. What, in conjunction with the title, could be the nature of a play ushered in with stark, Sibelian ululation? Then what could the title mean? One would have to be very careful not to joke about it, since it would probably turn out to be the second line of "Paracelsus" or the eleventh of "Sordello." When the overture was still at it after some ten grim minutes or so, the hardier and less musical among us sought help from the programme by means of matches and lighters, whereby a kind of elucidation forthcame.

It appears that in Norway certain rodents called lemmings annually swim out into the North Sea. The island which is their objective having become submerged, they swim on till they are drowned, and as noné ever returns the annual exodus continues. Surely this is very odd? Surely the sense which told the first lot of trippers that there was an island which liked to be visited should exist to-day to give the opposite warning? While we were pondering this the music stopped as inexplicably as it had begun, and the curtain went up on, of all things in the world, the drawing-room of a preparatory school near Newcastle.

Heartily astride the hearthrug was Robin Claydon (Mr. Cecil Parker), one of those headmasters who feel themselves to be *in loco parentis* not only to the pupils but to the ushers. Haughtily aloof on an uncomfortable chair sat Jane Claydon (Miss Gladys Cooper), the head's sculptural wife, with a look which betokened that trouble was brewing. Presently, under cover of an invitation to tea, the head called the roll of his assistants. All were present: which, in the course of the play, would need correction? Would it be Beringer (Mr. Laurence Olivier), the healthy-looking new master? Or Mann (Mr. Gilbert Davis), the reincarnation of Trotter, not Job but Mr. Sheriff's? Or Weyland (Mr. Griffith Jones), obviously a tutor and a gentleman? Or Chetwood (Mr. Tony Bruce), a tasteful person addicted to suède shoes? Here the author had sacrificed probability to fun. Chetwood got a laugh every time he opened his mouth, but one realised that Jane, if not her husband, would have had sufficient perception to hoof the young man out of their charges' way at the first shrug of his equivocal shoulders.

But the tally of masters was not yet complete, and when in a play you are looking for trouble it is always safe to look hardest at the star. This, presumably, was Sebastian (Mr. Raymond Massey), the games and classics master. At any rate, Sebastian came in last, and we soon knew two things about him—first, that he drank like a fish, and second, that he could not stand Jane Claydon. There was also Tilly (Miss Helen Spencer), governess to the littlest boys, and the situation at the end of the first act was that Mr. Olivier was in love with Miss Spencer, and that both were being blessed by Miss Cooper, about whom Mr. Massey was muttering curses not loud but deep.

The second act discovered Perrin hitting the Trail, the long trail, the old trail, that Messrs. Kipling, Walpole, van Druten and all the others find familiar and leave new for the next-comer. King, we remember, could not hit it off with Hartopp, whereby Stalky gloated. In the present

case nobody could hit it off with Sebastian, which was not surprising since he was on the verge of delirium tremens, partly caused by his insufficiently slaked ardour for Jane. Earlier on one said that he couldn't abide her, but this in the theatre is what our younger novelists would call "prelude to passion." Earlier on one also described Jane as sculptural, but equally this in the theatre points to some volcano stuccoed with the pale cast of circum-spection. The only thing which puzzled was how Sebastian managed to continue to be games master. Two heads are better than one, but not if they seem to belong to the boy to whom you are bowling.

All this part of the play was very good fun, since it postulated Jane going for constitutionals in the direction of a copse where Sebastian was lying doggo, after which she would return to help the housekeeper with the laundry, and he to take the third form in Latin. Was ever woman in such humour wooed? Were ever scholarships with such teaching won? The more serious part of the play concerned Tilly and Beringer. Tilly had told the young man to his face that if ever she loved it would be for keeps, and the young man ought to have taken the hint. But he didn't, and too light-heartedly made proposal of marriage, which started the inevitable descent into the bottomless pit of womanly devotion. Instinctively Tilly tried to mould herself on the man who wanted the original Tilly, and not a copy of himself. But, then, Tilly presumably had not read, and could not take warning from that poem in which Mr. Humbert Wolfe has just told us that all lovers must bear in mind his dancer's:

The thing I do  
is to maintain myself for you . . .  
If I must fly for you, as I have flown,  
I must have wings and use them as my own,  
keeping that air which is with wings acquainted  
by the mere freedom of my flight untainted.

These hapless lovers were the play's real interest, though its excitement lay in what happened to the other pair.

Afternoons were shortening, copses becoming less hospitable, and, to cut a long story short, Sebastian had a fit in the common-room and made such a noise about it that the entire school hammered at the door, causing the games and classics master to cry: "Keep them out, keep them out!" to the bewilderment of young scamps expecting to be kept in.

The beginning of the third act was obscured by two misapprehensions. In the morning Sebastian, dead-drunk, had left the third form at their Latin. Declaring he could stand it no longer, he had mounted his motor-bike and opened her throttle, whereby one deduced that he intended doing the same for his own. It was now midnight, and, there being no news, Tilly had worked herself into a "state." Could she sit up a little while with Beringer, and as she was very cold would he kiss her and for the last time say he loved her? Here the trained playgoer scented poison, and what could that trampling in the corridor be except the heavy feet of men carrying Sebastian's body, particularly when Tilly, rushing to the door, bade Beringer not look? But Tilly hadn't taken poison, and it was only Sebastian staggering home. And not only home but into Jane's room, upon whose bed he proceeded to lay him doon and dee.

At this point Jane's wits deserted her. She had only to call for Robin, who slept adjacently, and explain that Sebastian had been so drunk as not to know his own death-bed, instead of which she screamed for Robin, and, pointing to the tragic loading of her couch, bade him get somebody to help him remove her lover! Whereupon Robin called her a wicked woman, and the curtain came down leaving us wondering what on earth lemans have to do with lemmings. From what shore had these unfortunate people set out? What island had they hoped to reach? Why had it sunk? And why, not being rodents, didn't they turn back?

The evening began in obscurity, and I have no doubt that readers are still in the dark as to the significance of

the quotation which stands at the head of this article. The point is that a few weeks ago I handsomely dispraised Mr. Massey, who is not a light comedian, for his performance in a light comedy, and that it is now my intention to come out just as strongly on the other side. As a gay dog, this actor evokes melancholy; in the portrayal of sad and under dogs he calls for our highest admiration. When Sebastian makes his first entrance we sense a soul in torment, with doom written in his eye-sockets and the hang of his lower lip. He speaks under strange compulsion; he knows the *black* dog has him, and we know it too. When he makes his last entrance we know that he is drunk, though there is no recourse to the business of intoxication; we know, too, that he is dying, and at the end we feel that he is dead. More than this, Sebastian is presented not as an irreclaimable debauchee, but as a man fine of grain who has gone under. This is good acting by a player who, when he is reasonably cast, cannot easily be bettered.

Miss Cooper, in steeling herself to yet another ungrateful part, once more earns our gratitude. A trustee for loveliness, she must often have meditated on Grosvenor's answer to Patience wishing him a thought less beautiful: "Would that I were; but candour compels me to admit that I am not!" But need the wife of a Northumbrian schoolmaster wear gowns by Molyneux, and should not a Newcastle schoolmistress be a shade more grammatical and avoid such solecisms as "like you and I"? These are the only criticisms I have to offer on a subtle, understanding and clever performance. I hope it is permissible to allude once more to Miss Cooper's unselfishness. In "Cynara" she gave a young actress a first-class chance, and now she leads in a play in which the better rôle is that of Tilly.

Miss Spencer takes her opportunity with both hands, and though the clinging, cloying creature is wholly irritating, the performance moves us by its sensibility in both uses of the word. Mr. Parker radiates an owlsh, uncomprehend-



ing gusto which is delightful, Mr. Olivier asks for our sympathy and gets it, Mr. Jones gives distinction to a character which on paper hardly exists, while Messrs. Davis and Bruce in two highly vulnerable parts declare and bring off little slams.

Except that the fir trees suggest that Northumberland forms part of Boecklin's Toten-Insel, Mr. Aubrey Hammond's scenery is excellent, and Mr. Massey's clever production, besides being swift and smooth, makes the whole thing credible.

## TWO BRONTË PLAYS

*Royalty.*

*Thursday, April 20, 1933.*

### "THE BRONTËS"

A Play. By Alfred Sangster

PARODYING contemporary criticism, Théophile Gautier wrote in the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*: "It is deplorable that to-day's authors should expend their talents on lubricities at which a captain of dragoons must blush." He went on to add that the modesty of captains in the dragoons is the most touching discovery since Columbus. How much of the real Brontë truth is to be told us by the imminent horde of Brontë-mongers? The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? It is the middle term which provides the difficulty. What about Branwell's new-rumoured letters at which the cheeks of brigadiers must inevitably mantle?

There are two standards by which a Brontë play may be judged. Does it stand up to and faithfully embody all the details dug to date out of the inexhaustible Brontë mine? Or does it live up to what one might call the mass-ignorance of the subject, the notion of two and a quarter blazing geniuses, a talent drink-eclipsed, and a domestic tyrant, all weltering in a filthy hole which had somehow got itself perched on to the top of one of Yorkshire's loveliest moors?

Mr. Sangster's play satisfies the second of these requirements admirably. It suggests the gloomy hell which the family made for itself when it was alive, and at the end peoples their room with ghosts. But the bit at the Brussels *pension* should be ruthlessly deleted; it adds nothing to the play's development, and we wonder what Mr. and Madam

Mantalini are doing in that galley. Again, the second scene in the last act should end when Charlotte waves to her lover Nicholls out of window; the letter-writing which follows is not Brontesque but Barrie-ish. Atonement is made, however, in an excellent little scene in which two of the sisters beard their publishers, Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co., who, for the purposes of discomfiture, have co-opted Thackeray and Lewes. Thackeray, by the way, is capitally done by Mr. Henry Wolston, and Mr. Brian Oulton makes a handsome shot at Lewes, the ugliest man in Europe, always excepting George Eliot.

For the rest the play sticks closely to the popular notion, except that Branwell gives no sign of his quality and is enacted by clever Mr. Denys Blakelock, who has uncleverly chosen a wig which, accurate or not, bespeaks burlesque. Branwell's silliness should have a streak of dæmonism; Mr. Emlyn Williams is the actor wanted here. The play has two admirable touches. The first is when the old man returns in solicitude to the son he has left in drunken stupor on the floor. The second is where in his wandering old age he mouths of immortality and, falling back in his chair, asks Nicholls what he has been talking about, whereupon Nicholls says quietly: "Nothing!" Let it be said that Mr. Sangster presents an impressive and not over-exaggerated portrait of the old man. Emily's dying, too, is very well contrived, and the curtain fell on this scene in one of the deadest silences I have ever known in a theatre.

The problem of casting is only partially solved. Miss Dorothy Black is superbly right as Emily, that untamed captive beating out her life against Haworth bars. This actress puts genius on the stage so that we believe it, and when she defies death we know that she is dying. The difficulty begins with Charlotte, that "shy, fiery-eyed, little school-marm," who gears up the whole family to creative action and yet must wear the roundest of faces. The thing is a contradiction in terms, and Miss Lydia Sherwood attempting the impossible cannot achieve more than a

grave and winning persistence. She should, in fact, play Anne, who is non-suited by Miss Helena Pickard's Cranford-like charm.

The play is a respectable contribution to the theatre and should do much to leaven misapprehension as deep as it is popular. So late as the third act a lady asked me to account for the prominence of Emily since she had always understood Charlotte to have written all the family's novels. This suggests that in the matter of surmise we are in for some wild Aprils.

*Apollo.*

*Friday, May 26, 1933.*

### "WILD DECEMBERS"

A Play. By Clemence Dane

It would be sheer affectation to pretend that readers of this column are not all agog to know which of the two Brontë plays is the better. Of course they are, and rightly. Comparisons may be odious. But they may also be inevitable, as when at a show two fine leapers are left in the final for the high jump. Both Miss Clemence Dane and Mr. Alfred Sangster have put themselves at that considerable fence which is the Brontë family, and it is natural to ask which of the two has topped it more successfully, the distinguished mistress of letters or the travelling player.

Miss Dane has handicapped herself from the start by not giving her play sufficient roots. There may be universes, and modern science suggests that there are, in which effect does not proceed from cause. But Haworth Parsonage is in what we are pleased to deem a very human universe, and it is impossible for us not to believe that those three girls and that boy got their genius from somewhere. Now the only person they can have got it from is the Rev. Patrick—unless a leaf is to be taken out of Mr. Gordon Bottomley's book and postulating an ogres

nipped in cerebration's bud, in which case somebody had better write another play entitled "Brontë's Wife." Failing Mrs. Brontë, we come back to the old man over whom Miss Dane has taken no trouble at all, making him a mere mooning silly and meek elderly lamb. Mr. Marcus Barron is very nearly the best actor in the world, yet even he fails since there is nothing for him to succeed with. The Brontë family should be like steam compressed within the kettle of this egocentric's will, for one is never going to believe that the books were not written under terrific pressure from both within and without. The Parsonage must have been a little Hell; Miss Dane makes it an agreeable Paradise in which Branwell scrabbles while the sisters scribble, for no better reason than that they were odd young ladies and he an odd young gentleman.

Then Miss Dane wastes a lot of time in Brussels, as though interest in the Brontë family lay in the extent to which Charlotte makes an autumn crocus of herself. Insistence on this episode must always harm a Brontë play, because as soon as we get back to Haworth it drops out of mind. The spectator forgets it, for it is not what he wants to know about Charlotte, and it is significant of Miss Diana Wynyard's strength and weakness in this part that she is far better here than anywhere else. But one feels that just as Haworth shut out Brussels, so there is no room for Brussels in a Brontë play. The only interest—and I keep on saying it till I am blue in the face!—in these young women is how they came to write the grandest prose that had been seen in the English language since Bunyan. Nothing else about them matters a tinker's curse. Now the only way to suggest this interest is to concentrate upon the old man who begat not only the bodies but the spirits of his children. Mr. Sangster has seen this, and by virtue of his seeing it his play has a drive and a compulsion to which Miss Dane's never attains. Oddly enough she does both Branwell and the Rev. Nicholls better, and the latter's proposal of marriage is probably the best thing in the two plays. And there are one or two good moments,

as when the stoical Emily allows Branwell to maul her burnt hand, and when at Emily's dying the three black-gowned sisters take the stage like crows in catastrophe. The scene at Smith Elder's is ineffective, and so is the wedding, and the play peters out—which is exactly what, in the other case, it avoids!

And, of course, there is hardly a moment at which, despite laudable efforts to the contrary, Miss Wynyard does not gloriously and triumphantly and radiantly wreck the inferior play. Don't tell me that this Charlotte would bother about being a governess or even a Currer Bell! Anonymity and that face is a conjunction of the sheerest nonsense; its owner, taking the hint from Rachel, must have made a mouthful of the London stage. Here again the programme shows an astonishing insensitiveness by burgeoning out into three full-page photographs of Miss Wynyard in orchidaceous bloom, when the whole object of the management should have been to help the actress to suggest something bordering on the herbaceous. In other words, while I do not believe in this Charlotte I very much believe in Miss Wynyard, who ought not to have been cozened into mistaking Charlotte for the leading part. This ought to be called the Brontë pitfall or trap for unwary leading-ladies, to protect whom in the future I hereby announce that any play about the Brontës will always be run away with by whoever plays Emily. Miss Beatrix Lehmann, whose talent is in the Flora Robson category, runs away with the present piece so hard and so fast that there is hardly anything left for poor Miss Wynyard to perform in.

The real truth of the matter is that two lots of cooks have spoiled what might and should have been a single broth, the two managements having between them got the right players but put them into the wrong parts. No Brontë play can succeed unless the casting is of maximum felicity throughout. Let Mr. Sangster, then, remain where he is for the Rev. Patrick, but let Miss Lehmann play Charlotte! Keep Miss Black as Emily and retain from the pre-

sent play Mr. Emlyn Williams for Branwell and Mr. Ralph Richardson for the Rev. Nicholls, since both of these are very fine. If the Hegers are to be in, then by all means Mr. Austin Trevor and Miss Stella Arbenina from Miss Dane's play. Here you have a cast which would be a credible imitation of what these people must have been really like. Miss Wynyard? She will live to be the making of a hundred plays provided she is not asked to simulate "shy, fiery-eyed, little school-marms." She should not, for example, play Jane Austen, presumably the next in vogue. This actress is of the mould to act anything from Hecuba to Brünnhilde, with a first-class title to whatever is the feminine form of sock and buskin. The mitten, No!

## SWAT THAT WASP!

*May 14, 1933.*

BEFORE I come to this week's plays I have to get something off my mind. There is a nest of wasps which must be smoked out because it is doing the theatre infinite harm. I have a duty to per-form and I shall per-form it, as the mayoress said in Bennett's play. In other words, I must do the smoking. I refer to a small coterie of highbrows which makes a point of running down everything that does not happen to live at the top of their particular street. Waspishness set in with "Cavalcade," which it declared to be bad art grating on everything that one would most want to forget. "Dear Noel has run quite off the lines," it buzzed about the foyer. It deplored the absence of Noel's wit without reflecting that Congreve and Shakespeare, Sheridan and Wilde all put together could not be witty in Wembley Stadium or the Tattoo Ground at Aldershot or in the immense arena which is Drury Lane.

As for the patriotism of "Cavalcade"—that was just "good taste misplaced," this virtue having become the last resort of any gentleman. Nor to these highbrows was the entertainment value of "Cavalcade" of any account. That it filled Drury Lane nine times a week for a year with an average of 2,600 people at a performance, that it found work for a great number of actors and stage hands, and that it kept the film wolf from the door of our nearest approach to a national theatre—these were pot-boiling arguments unworthy of highbrow consideration. According to these august fellows, it were better that Drury Lane should be pulled down than that pieces like "Cavalcade" should succeed. That they entertain the masses is merely another charge against them, since, the highbrows argue, they debase the minds of the mob with tawdry, false and ignoble sentiment. If pressed they will maintain that cot-



tage walls should be bare rather than hung with Friths and Landseers, and bookshelves empty rather than belching Corellis and Hall Caines.

In the theatre our highbrows like low stuff provided it is genuinely low, because then it is "amusing." Red-nosed comedians, pantomime dames, burlesques at the old Elephant and Castle and under the ægis of Mr. Carroll—these things they permit. But there must be nothing else in the theatre between them and the masterpieces. Say you point out that not all of the public has the stomach for these last, that just as man cannot live by bread alone so he cannot exist on an exclusive diet of nectar and ambrosia, that there must, in short, be middling plays for middling people. With this they are unmoved. You point out that if their policy prevailed all the theatres must close. They shrug their shoulders. Ask them if they, the exquisitely sensitised, are sufficient in number and able and willing to support a theatre providing nothing except masterpieces, and they shrug again.

Another critic put the matter in a nutshell when he wrote: "The highbrow who is perfectly honest will say this: 'I care nothing at all whether middlebrows are entertained or not. I only know that what entertains them disgusts me. Equally, I recognise no obligation to support the kind of entertainment which pleases me. I shall patronise it when I feel like it, and I shall not patronise it when I don't feel like it. If as a result of my attitude the entertainments I like cease to exist, I cannot help it. I am willing to take the risk; they have not ceased up to the present, and I see no reason why they should cease now. Great art is always precarious, and great artists have nearly always starved. I intend to take advantage of both when they come my way, and I see no moral obligation to do anything except pay for my ticket when I want one. At the same time, I hold myself free to condemn all popular entertainment.' That is an honest attitude which I can understand. It is despicable, but it is honest." I agree.

Wasps make a point of attacking one in public places. They will settle on a table where one is supping and hum: "I thought you were very lenient to Sangster's play." I reply: "I thought it was a good little play, and, anyhow, I wasn't bored." The wasp says: "Oh, I wasn't *bored*—I laughed consumedly throughout!" A lesser and more esoteric wasp will then join in: "But surely the play lacked pattern, rhythm, dynamic entity?" I repeat that I thought it was a pretty play. They chorus, and I gather that this is their point; that when first-class minds go to a theatre to see a play about the Brontës, that play must not exist unless it adds something to minds already Brontëfied to saturation-point. There can't, don't I see, be a play for second- or third-rate minds about the Brontës, and by implication I ought to have wiped Mr. Sangster's little piece off the map instead of putting it on a tentative corner.

But a truce to politeness! These intellectual busybodies and self-importances must be told that they number less than one per cent. of the world's playgoers, and that dramatic criticism is as to ninety-nine per cent. of it not addressed to their superior selves, though the odd one per cent. is there if it is intelligently looked for. Such criticism is written for not only *l'homme moyen sensuel* but for *l'homme moyen intelligent*; in other words, for the middlebrow. A little play like "The Brontës" has a perfect right to exist since it is capable of giving a great number of playgoers pleasure; it does not set out to be a crashing masterpiece, is not judged as such, and the implication that it is will not be found in my article. The highbrow ought to be able better than anybody else to read between lines and gather whether a play is for him or not. If he goes to a piece expecting to find it belonging to a class other than that in which the critic has placed it, his disappointment is his own fault.

Finally, the playgoer of any height of brow who can laugh at Miss Dorothy Black's Emily Brontë should be put not in the buzzing but in the braying category. Why

have I bothered about these people? Because they inaugurate that supper-table talk which really decides the fate of any and every play. To-day the theatre is menaced on all sides, and I am not going to see it stung to death. My wasps are like Burke's grasshoppers in that they deem themselves of more importance than the solider British cattle; as leaders of theatrical gossip they *are* more important.

## AN OPEN LETTER TO MR. COCHRAN

*June 11, 1933.*

MY DEAR CHARLES—

Cross producers must be suffered by critics with whatever fortitude they can muster. Cross purposes are another matter; they are a part of muddled thinking which generous adversaries will always want to clear up. Shall we therefore try to decide exactly what it is that we are quarrelling about, because to judge from the letter you addressed to the Editor of this paper last week I feel that you are in some uncertainty? In your last sentence you express astonishment that "critics of the known sensitiveness and taste of Mr. Agate should stifle just the sort of play for which they are always loudly calling." The fact that the sting of your letter is in its proper place, the tail, is an additional reason why I should go back to my article, "Swat That Wasp!" the exact purport of which you do not appear to have grasped.

The point of that article was not to attack "the type of petty, destructive critic of the theatre which pays no tribute to honest endeavour." These general knockers and wholesale panners have existed since the earliest times; there was no more reason to demolish them on May 14, 1933, than on any other date since the birth of Æschylus. But about the time of "Cavalcade" a new type of wasp evolved itself, the type which pays high tribute to the highest endeavour but no tribute at all to anything which it deems to be on lower levels. According to these amateur critics "Cavalcade," not being an "Edipus Rex" or a "Hamlet," is unworthy of consideration, and it is a waste of time to say whether Mr. Coward made a good or bad job of it. There can be no better or best adaptations of, say "Helen!" because Meilhac, Halévy and Offenbach

are sacrosanct, and you must not delete a sentence from the libretto or add a fiddle to the score. In the matter of revues there can be no difference between a "Say When" and a "Here's How" because neither of them is a "Wake Up and Dream." But need I continue?

Now my attack on this school was brought about in connection with just this question of the Brontë plays. I wrote: "They (the wasps) chorus that when first-class minds go to a theatre to see a play about the Brontës, that play must not exist unless it adds something to minds already Brontëfied to saturation-point. There can't, don't I see, be a play for second- or third-rate minds about the Brontës." In other words, there can't be second- or third- or seventh- or tenth-rate plays about the Brontës, because all plays about them which are not first-rate can only, as Mrs. Amanda Ros put it, "remain within the false bosom of buried scorn." The point of my article was to show how false that bosom is, to make a plea for middlebrow plays for middlebrow playgoers, and to justify professional criticism of such plays. Analogy is not always accurate, but it may be helpful. Let me suggest, then, that a breeder of racehorses looking for a three-year-old stallion and not in a position to buy the winner of the Derby will take very great stock indeed of the difference between the second horse and the last. Now let me return to that sentence in which you complain that I should stifle just the sort of play for which I have loudly called. Surely you must see that my notices of the two Brontë plays, far from stifling the *kind*, were inquiries after the health of the *example*? In other words, you blame me for the very thing I did not do! Unless, of course, you hold that the critic who says that B is better than A is stifling the category to which both A and B belong. Which would be absurd.

You allude to the acting opportunities in Miss Dane's play and to your delight in reintroducing Miss Wynyard to the playgoers of this country. I sympathise. But it does not follow that those acting opportunities were opportunities for this actress, and if another analogy may help,

let me say that while "adoring" lobster salad and "worshipping" strawberries and cream, I don't eat both off the same plate. It is quite possible that "the Duchess of Rutland, Major the Hon. Maurice Baring, Lady Desborough, Mr. Edward Knoblock, Mr. Eddie Marsh, Miss Sybil Thorndike, and hundreds of" other notables are right about this play and that I am wrong. Indeed, I myself have been favoured with a letter from one of these exalted personages, which contains this passage: "I don't believe you understand Clemence Dane's burning white-hot passion at all." Perhaps I don't. Perhaps I was too busy looking for the passion of which in her play the Rev. Patrick Brontë is so dismally dispossessed to search for it elsewhere. That lack and Miss Wynyard's superb looks seemed to me to be the two rocks upon which this play might be held to founder, and I notice that in your animadversions you do not deal with these. Perhaps you can't! The first admits of no discussion. As for the second, I claim that to attempt to subdue Miss Wynyard's radiance to the plain school-marm who was Charlotte Brontë is as unhappy as to cast a notoriously plain actress for Helen!

Whether a play is or is not worth going to introduces an element which is not the critic's concern. It is strictly not my business to tell any playgoer whether it is more worth his while to visit a theatre than to spend the evening punting on the river or pounding at a piano quintet by Brahms. Yet dramatic critics are human, and in the matter of worth-whileness we like to give tips even by implication. That is why in my notice of "Wild Decembers" I was careful to leave in such pointers as that Miss Dane "does both Branwell and the Rev. Nicholls better (than Mr. Sangster), and the latter's proposal of marriage is probably the best thing in the two plays." I also stressed the fact that Mr. Emlyn Williams and Mr. Ralph Richardson "are very fine," and that Miss Beatrix Lehmann's talent "is in the Flora Robson category." Can you still "defy any reader to get the impression that the play was worth seeing at all"? Your letter suggests that while pre-

tending one thing I performed another ; it should now be clear that what I pretended and what I performed went hand in hand.

Let me insist, even at the risk of tediousness, that it is this business of pretence and performance which is all the matter between us. If it is not, then I can only conclude that your quarrel with me is that I thought "Wild Decembers" a less good play than "The Brontës," and said so. Now, my dear Charles, let us once and for all get straight with one another on this point. I do not claim to be infallible. It may very well be that your Duchesses are right and I am wrong about Miss Dane's play. It may be that some of my wasps were right in disliking "Cavalcade" and "Helen!" and that my enthusiasm for these two productions was contemptible. All I claim when you invite me to express an opinion on one of your productions is the right to give that opinion undoctored and without regard to the record and aura of your successes, and to the personal relationship. But I invite you also to see that I cannot allow it to be said that to criticise the example is to kill the kind. If you produce "All For Love" on top of somebody else's production of "Antony and Cleopatra," and I take occasion to show in what respects Dryden's version of the story is inferior to Shakespeare's, you are not entitled to protest that my criticism is an attempt to stifle the classics. I think there is no more to be said except that I am, as always,

Your sincere friend and admirer,  
JAMES AGATE.

## THE RIGHT WAY WITH SHERIDAN

*Embassy.*

*Tuesday, May 2, 1933.*

### "THE RIVALS"

#### Revival of Sheridan's Comedy

ASPIRANTS to the Services have to submit to examination. Why should there not be one for those who aspire to the high and noble profession of dramatic critic? The little wanton boys that swim on bladders of self-sufficiency would be ploughed, but if the paper were skilful enough it is doubtful whether the baldest or most grizzled among us would get through. Three questions would suffice. Question one: What exactly was all the bother about Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Cassandra, Electra? and if there were separate bothers, disentangle them. Question two: Give the order of the scenes in "Hamlet," and say whether it was the Witches, Lady Macbeth, or his own fancy which first suggested to Macbeth the murder of Duncan. Question three: Give an outline of the plot of "The Way of the World," and explain in detail who in Act IV, scene 2 of "The Rivals" everybody takes everybody else to be. I see no objection to confessing my inability to answer more than one of all these questions.

At no point in the history of playgoing can the plot of "The Rivals" have mattered very much to anybody. These old plays are really comedies of character, and to be taken, I submit, very much as we take a novel of Dickens. Does anybody to-day, while still glorying in Micawber and Vincent Crummles, care anything at all about the machinations of Uriah and Ralph? Familiarity breeds contempt in plots as in everything else, and ultimately even the sublimest cease to matter. I take the plot of "Hamlet" to be the most awe-inspiring concatenation that ever sprang from the brain of man and, *pace*



Mr. Newman, the plot of Wagner's "Ring" to be the dullest. Together with all the saner Wagnerian fans, I have resolutely declined to allow my delight in Wagnerian sound to be adulterated with the nonsense of its supposed sense; the chunnering of Wotan and not what he is chunnering about is all that matters.

But the horripilating thing is that the same happens to me with regard to "Hamlet." I now no longer care in what order the melodies are played so long as I hear them once in the evening; indeed, I should hardly notice if Hamlet opened the ball by protesting how all occasions did inform against him. Probably the adjudicator at a Brass Band Contest does not really hear, to the extent of being emotionally affected by, 167 performances of the Overture to "Zampa." Obviously he must map out the piece into bits and ask how each bit is being done. So it is with "Hamlet," which I have come to regard as Shakespeare's finest *comedy*, there being no actor living to shake me out of contemplation of its polish.

The plot of "The Rivals," then, is the last thing the wise playgoer will trouble about, because if he does trouble he will probably land himself with a headache. The fun lies not in the incidents but in the characters, always provided that they are adequately portrayed. The performance at the Embassy is uneven. The first thing necessary is that socially the characters should be all of a piece. It is a mistake to present Bob Acres as a country bumpkin smelling of the stableyard. Acres drives his own horses, has a place within a mile of Sir Anthony's, and is "very intimate" with that circle. He is a country gentleman, and though stupid is not a clown. He should be a credible, rational person, though with a limited amount of reasoning power. His preoccupation with his honour is not wholly farcical, and in the duelling scene he should be something better than a figure of fun; we may say that in the early part of the play he should be a cut above Tony Lumpkin and at the end not quite Aguecheek. Sir Nigel Playfair, in the Hammersmith

revival of eight years ago, fitted Acres with the perfect expression of natural wonder and bewilderment, and it was true of his playing as of Dodd's—though to be sure Dodd lavished this on Aguecheek—that “you could see the first dawn of an idea stealing slowly over his countenance, climbing up by little and little, with a painful process, till it cleared up at last to the fullness of a twilight conception—its highest meridian.”

Mr. Lionel Marson plays Acres like Aguecheek in his salad days, an interpretation perhaps forced on him by his physique. Acres are broad and not thin, and the actor for Bob should be moonfaced. Lady Tree skilfully avoids the mistake of playing Mrs. Malaprop as though she were a theatrical landlady. Lydia Languish's aunt is a woman of position, pretentious and ill-educated. Her malapropisms show contact with culture, though she has not, as she would say, *assimilated* it. They are a refinement upon Dogberry's “burglary” for “perjury,” where the connection lies only in the sound and not at all in the sense. In Mrs. Malaprop's case there is, as it were, an overtone of resemblance in meaning. We should expect her to say of a disease that it was *contiguous*. She would not let a daughter of hers meddle with “algebra, or simony, or fluxions, or paradoxes.” Since the whole thing depends upon algebra is it too far-fetched to imagine that “simony” is an echo of sines and cosines, that “fluxions” are liquefied fractions, and that “paradoxes” derive from parabolas? Her description of Cerberus as “three gentlemen at once” is not very wide of the mark; she has got hold of the right dog but by the wrong tail. Or is all this too far-fetched, and in endeavouring to be lucid am I being merely obvious? The point is that the malapropisms are the natural disgorgings of one who has bitten off more culture than she can chew, and being natural should be given forth without affectation. Lady Tree, who looks like a Gainsborough, does this perfectly, and with an air of gentility which explains why nobody on the stage dares to laugh at Mrs. Malaprop, though making fun behind her back. It is a capital performance.

Mr. Eric Portman does as well as anybody can do with Jack Absolute, that handsome shell of a part. For Sir Anthony one quality is indispensable. The actor must be capable of being testy, whereas Mr. Baliol Holloway cannot fly at anything less than a royal rage. His old gentleman is in earnest about his tempers, whereas Sheridan's old boy is conscious of enjoying them. Nor does Mr. Holloway look right. His gaunt, handsome features cannot assume the crab-apple roundness which must accompany this kind of choler, and he stalks about the stage like some credible imitation of Irving's Louis XI. I am not implying a bad performance, since the playing is as good as the mask permits. But it is the wrong mask.

Quaking in my shoes, I shall say that Faulkland is a part which can never be played by anybody. If he is underplayed, he is a bore; if overplayed, he becomes the centre of a comedy which is about something else. Mr. Claude Rains at Hammersmith centred the play in this character, and drenched us all with his rodomontade, and I should like to see Mr. Thesiger turn the fellow's neurosis to affectation, which might be very funny. Mr. Leslie Mitchell does his best, and is not to be blamed for a character which Sheridan never quite made to fit.

Miss Eileen Branch's Julia should speak a little more distinctly, Miss Cherry Cottrell gives a very clever little performance as Lucy, Mr. Oliver Johnston makes an easy, natural Sir Lucius, and Mr. Anthony Shaw is quite perfect as Fag, that lineal ancestor of Mr. John Smauker. "Their regular hours stupefy me! Mr. Faulkland's gentleman and I keep it up a little in private parties." Meaning, presumably, that the swarry would be on the table a little before midnight! Of the actress who is cast for Lydia Languish I can only say that she is, as Costard pronounced of Sir Nathaniel's Alexander, "Alas! you see how 'tis—a little o'erparted!" On the whole, a respectable production for a little theatre, good relatively if not obsoletely, as Mrs. Malaprop might say.

## BAD REASONS, GOOD PLAY

*Ambassadors.*

*Tuesday, May 23, 1933.*

### “MARTINE”

A Play. By Jean-Jacques Bernard. English Version by John Leslie Frith

If only people would not explain things! Or take care that their explanations are at least intelligent! It was surely a pity to burden this lovely little play with one of the most mountainously silly prefaces which can ever have been printed in a programme. “The originality of Jean-Jacques Bernard’s works and the æsthetic processes by which he has vitalised them place him far above the few deft psychologists and dexterous dramatists who uphold the prestige and the éclat of comedy in France.” But since M. Bernard is easily the deftest of France’s psychologists and the most dexterous of her dramatists, it follows that his “æsthetic processes” have been so vital as to place him above himself. Which is absurd. The only person who is above himself is the writer of this preface.

Next we are to note that M. Bernard is “not distinguished for the originality or strangeness of his subjects.” But doesn’t his best-known play, “L’Ame en Peine,” deal with a woman of fashion so much in love with a man she has never seen, but only sensed, that she must sit outside the prison in which she doesn’t even know him to be confined? It seems to me that such an interlude would be considered strange and original by most husbands, if not by most playwrights. Then there is something about it being harder to write an unwitty play than a witty one, after which M. Bernard is introduced as the arch-explainer of himself. He says: “The theatre, above all, is the art of the unexpressed. It is less according to the rejoinders themselves than by the effect of the rejoinders

that the most profound sentiments ought to be revealed. In addition to the dialogue which is heard, it is necessary to bring out a subjacent dialogue and to render this intelligible to the audience. . . . The logic of the theatre does not admit sentiments which the situation does not demand, and if the situation demands them it is not necessary to express them. Spoken words in themselves are poor instruments to express all that we wish to say. They have no more value than a violin string in repose, but what marvellous meaning may be drawn therefrom!"

Great artists should always be protected against themselves. What this very fine playwright means is that the theatre is a house of many mansions, one of which may properly be set aside for "the art of the unexpressed." As "Martine" proves, this can be a lovely little mansion, and in this line M. Bernard is easily the world's foremost painter and decorator. But just as all rooms in a house should not be alike, so it is nonsense to say that the theatre "above all" ought to be this, that, or the other thing. Long before M. Bernard "the logic of the theatre" did not admit sentiments which the situation did not demand. Or else we should find Goneril interrupting her father's curse and telling the old man to put a sock in it.

I confess to being a little staggered at the statement that the sentiments demanded by a situation should not be expressed. Æschylus and that lot did not impose this restriction on their wordy selves. Racine and Corneille were not exactly mum, and one way and another Shakespeare himself did a lot of talking. If "Come, seeling night" and all that follows is mere catgut, then 'twere well "Macbeth" were acted in dumb show. The truth, of course, is that it is not M. Bernard's intention to call every dramatist unpacking his heart with words the naughty thing that Hamlet called himself. It is the old story of arguing from the particular to the general, with a spot of bad logic thrown in. That Manx cats have no tails does not mean that all cats must be tailless. That one kind of drama may be implicit does not rule out all the explicit kinds.

At this point the reader may be asking what all this theoretical and Shakespearean pother has to do with the love affair of a French peasant girl, which is all that "Martine" is about. The answer is that not I but the programme began it. If a thing is printed the presumption is that it is to be read, and it is surely a mistake to mystify willing playgoers at the Ambassadors with the statement that the piece they are about to see "most aptly illustrates this doctrine of antagonism between literature and the theatre." It doesn't. There is no antagonism. "Macbeth" is tolerable literature and pretty good theatre. Maeterlinck's "Intérieur," in which hardly anything is said, and nothing happens, is first class both as literature and theatre. The whole trouble is that the writer of this prefatory note thinks that literature means a lot of fine words. It may mean that or it may mean a few simple ones; and each kind can render its own theatre perfect service.

It only remains to be said that the theme of "Martine" is exquisitely suited not so much to the idiom as to the self-denying ordinance which M. Bernard has invented for and passed upon himself. But I have to say that in my opinion he has cheated. His theatre proclaims itself as relying not on dialogue which is heard, but upon subjacent dialogue which is not; its heard melodies may be sweet or sour, but those unheard are to be the ones that matter. Surely if this theory is to be at all valid it should be applied to people who have a power of expression which because of the dramatist's self-imposed discipline, they must not use? Silence is only golden because speech is silver, and dumbness is no virtue in a man who cannot speak. If, therefore, there were any serious theory of playwriting involved, the characters in this play must be capable not only of knowing what they are suffering, but of expressing that knowledge. Whereas the tragedy in this piece is the exact opposite, since it is the tragedy of dumb animals who do not need any theory of non-expression to explain their inability to talk. Again, what a fearful pother, and all because a playwright has not been protected from himself!

Martine's tragedy has happened a million times. The young gentleman comes down to the farm, trifles innocently with Martine's affections, marries the daughter of the local landed proprietor, and goes out of the peasant girl's life for ever. She must now marry a brutalising if not brutal clod and bear him children, with only a grave at the end of forty, fifty, sixty empty years. It is a play of infinite contrivance, because here is the last word in simplification. It is utterly heartrending. It is more poignant than Hardy's "Woodlanders," because Marty South had not to marry, whereas little Martine must become the instrument of that fecundity which is at once the burden and the meaning of France. "When you have had your baby," says one of the couple who have unwittingly wrecked Martine's life, "you must come and see us in Paris!" And the oafish husband argues that this must be impossible, since there will be another baby on the way. In this dread and masterly sentence Martine's tragedy stands revealed.

The piece is beautifully acted. Since Miss Victoria Hopper, who must instantly change her name, is making her first appearance, it is too early to tell how good an actress she may become; the simplicity and unforced pathos of her Martine are this play's justification. Miss Hilda Trevelyan gives the most delicate and tender value to the scene in which, almost without words, she breaks to the child what her tragedy is to be. Mr. Roger Livesey with great skill avoids forcing the note of the uncomprehending oaf, Mr. Hubert Gregg gives a sensitive rendering of the unwitting mischief-maker, while as his wife Miss Rosalinde Fuller by doing one-tenth of her normal execution is ten times more successful than I have ever seen her. The piece must be the best that our theatre will know this year, for though a little masterpiece it is an impeccable one. I do not always see eye to eye with Mr. Carroll in his productions. To this one I take off my best hat.

## MR. MAUGHAM'S LAST PLAY

Wyndham's.

Thursday, September 14, 1933.

### "SHEPPEY"

A Play. By W. Somerset Maugham

Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.—*The Gospel according to St Matthew, Chapter 19.*

PERSONALLY—and impersonal criticism is to one of my temperament as feasible as an impersonal handshake—I wondered as I came out of the theatre whether I had been disappointed, and why brilliant shoemakers should not stick to their own lasts instead of grabbing other people's. For if ever a subject cried aloud for Shavian treatment—meaning the old formula of flippancy masking fervour—here had been that subject. But it is idle to complain of disappointment unless one has some notion of what one was looking for. Before we complain that Mr. Maugham has not hit the bull's-eye, we must decide what target he was aiming at. In other words, what did Mr. Maugham set out to do? And did he do it? And in being disappointed were we, or more accurately was I, confusing the play that Mr. Maugham had written with the play I would like him to have written? Or worse still, the play I would like Mr. Shaw to have written?

Mr. Maugham, then, must not be blamed for declining to be Shavian and insisting upon remaining Maughamesque. Whence it follows that we must ask what kind of delight we expected from the best Maughamesque treatment of this theme—the application of Christ's teaching to the modern world. Mr. Maugham, though never a deep thinker, was always a witty one. "It was the best butter," pleaded the March Hare, and from Mr. Maugham



we are entitled to expect the best wit, the best irony, and above all the best playcraft. Now, my first impression on Thursday was that the author had not devoted nearly enough time and trouble to what, given the subject, must be a major work. During the evening this clarified to the notion that Mr. Maugham had never quite decided what his subject was, and had been in three successive minds about it.

The play began with a first act of middling comedy in a barber's shop, comedy leading nowhere except to prepare us for Sheppey's windfall. It is true that the act also served to set before us Sheppey as the hairdresser's assistant who believed in luck and had decided what to do with his winnings before he won them. There was that little house on which he had long had an eye, the installation of a servant, and the marriage settlement for his daughter who could now pair off with her very superior board-school teacher. Thus Sheppey's normality was established, together with the fact that he suffered from heart-disease. But one felt that time was being wasted, that we ought to be tackling the great theme faintly hinted at when Sheppey told us how he regretted having given a sneak-thief into custody. Then came the windfall and, to the general as well as my private horror, a lot of Galsworthian sentimentality about taking sneak-thieves to one's bed, harlots to one's board, and so forth. The first act ended with the theme still in the air.

The second act announced it with full orchestra, and here it behoves me to be careful in the matter of the confounding of authors. Sheppey, who had suddenly seen the light, was determined to use his windfall for the benefit of sundry, but not all, since he intended to exclude his family from participation. I imagine that in any play on the subject Mr. Shaw would begin by drawing our attention to the first five words in the text: "If thou wilt be perfect." That Jesus was conscious of delivering a counsel of perfection is proved by these five words and the subsequent saying: "With man this is impossible; but with God all

things are possible." This gives full sanction to Mr. Shaw's view that the author of the render-unto-Cæsar saying when he spoke the words recorded by St. Matthew "was quite aware of all the objections that occur to the average stockbroker in the first five minutes."

I fancy that Mr. Shaw's play on Mr. Maugham's theme would have consisted of the Preface to "Androcles and the Lion" divided among the parties to a round-table conference. But I am also perfectly certain that the legs which Mr. Shaw would have drawn up beneath his argumentative mahogany would have belonged to reasonable people, people the world calls reasonable, people deeming themselves reasonable, people of the social standing and mental calibre of, say, Ibsen's Werles and Helmers and Granville-Barker's Voyseys, not to mention the characters in Mr. Shaw's own *Inhuman Comedy*. To denounce, and justify the denunciation of philanthropy as bad sociology, would have been the way of the social reformer, Mr. Shaw; one looked to Mr. Maugham, the ironist, to show, say, the deleterious effect of philanthropy on the philanthropist. But he gave us nothing of the sort, or any approach to it, for the whole of his second act was devoted to exhibiting the effect of philanthropy on those remaining outside its operations, *i.e.*, Sheppey's quite impossible family. And what characters! Characters who, instead of being subjected to the strain of a fine idea and discovering themselves unable to stand up to it, were unable to conceive the idea *and therefore to suffer the only kind of strain that could matter in this connection*.

It is of the highest significance that the young man who had great possessions was not a mere scallywag. But Sheppey's daughter is a scallywag or its feminine equivalent, at best a mindless little piece of goods. Consider this dialogue:

SHEPPEY: Sometimes I think the kingdom of 'eaven's in me own 'eart.

FLORRIE: You're barmy.

SHEPPEY (*smiling*): Because I want to live like Jesus?

FLORRIE: Well, who ever heard of anyone wanting to live like Jesus at this time of day? I think it's just blasphemous.

The last two sentences establish my case, which is that if this play was to be up to the level of its subject the beneficiaries bilked of their windfall must be those who every Sunday proclaim not only their desire to live like Jesus but their intention to do so from that Sunday's dinner onwards.

Suppose, for example, that the daughter's young man instead of being a school-teacher had been a clerk in holy orders. What a chance Mr. Maugham missed here, or did not dare to take! The young people's views on everything under the sun being what they were, it followed that to them Sheppey must appear insane, and it was good theatrical logic that Florrie should presently in a fit of mingled hysteria and rage pray to God to persuade the doctors that her father was a lunatic and must be put away. This scene had all that quality of popular shock which Mr. Maugham manages so astutely. It was full of good things, as when the mother finding her daughter praying said: "Not in the sitting-room, Florrie; I'm sure that's not right!" But by this time the argument had gone by the board, because Mr. Maugham had not given us anybody to argue with. What we wanted to see was the fight put up against Sheppey's idealism by people suffering from the daughter's disinclination to miss a fortune, but in their capacity as professing Christians debarred from advancing her arguments.

Here again Mr. Shaw would keep butting in. The infeasibility of a doctrine of self-pauperisation if practised by everybody is self-evident to the modern economist, and must have been self-evident to Christ, whose sayings were the poetic or religious crystallisation of truths possessing many sides, spiritual, political, social, economic. That a man should charge Christ's teaching with impracticability does not make him a bad Christian; those were lazy Christians before him who accepted the Christian

maxim at its face value and looked no further. The play which established this would conceivably end in the arraignment not of disobedient hearers, but of incompetent teachers of Christ's word, and it was this play which we were consistently denied.

Mr. Maugham may well plead that this play did not come within the scope of his intention. But he must have intended some kind of thoughtful play; to show idealism scoring off Florrie's level of mentality was not worth a master's while. We looked to the third act to show irony having a fling at Sheppey, there being nobody else in the play worth flinging it or anything else at. Alas that Mr. Maugham did not permit himself a single flick, preferring instead to treat us to an elaborate death-scene which turned the scarlet woman of the first act into the red herring of the third! For here she who appeared to Sheppey in the guise of the harlot was really Death, and there was a long colloquy which added nothing to the common stock of gloomy prognostications on this subject. This was pure waste of valuable time which might have been better expended in either confirming or rejecting, or at any rate giving us the author's views on Mr. Shaw's flat statement that "a man who is better than his fellows is a nuisance."

It seems to me, then, that Mr. Maugham has not only not written Mr. Shaw's play, but has failed to write his own, and that he has committed the cardinal sin of raising a great issue, burking it, and fobbing us off with minor entertainment. This play's first act wastes time; its second act wastes opportunity by scarifying the opinions of the mindless; its third act throws significance overboard by frittering the end away in a death scene which is not more applicable to Sheppey than to Box or Cox. In fact, I suspect Mr. Maugham of realising that he had missed his play and of fishing round for a means of ending it. As the curtain fell Sheppey's wife said: "He always said he was born lucky. He's died lucky too." Meaning, presumably, that her husband was lucky to go off suddenly. But was it not Mr. Maugham who was lucky to get out of explain-

ing the effect upon Sheppey of being better than his neighbours?

It is difficult to say how well a play is acted when all the time you are wishing the actors were flying at something else; the more they labour to achieve what you feel to be the wrong or unnecessary thing, the more you become insensitive to them. To be convincing in the later acts Mr. Ralph Richardson had to get up the steam of a divine unreason, and this did not square with the calculated arts of the salesman in hair-dyes. One felt that the actor was making a brave shot at a character the author didn't really know, and that one was not quite believing in either the barber or the ecstatic. Perhaps part of the fault lay in Mr. Richardson's training. Shakespeare will out, and I will swear that this player's whole manner of speech, including his respect for intonation, was never heard in a Jermyn Street saloon. A hairdresser born in the Isle of Sheppey and domiciled in Camberwell talks a clipped something which is very far removed from Mr. Richardson's English. About the beauty of intention there could be no doubt; this actor's little finger can cope with all the spirituality there is in Mr. Maugham's theatre. Mr. Eric Portman seemed to me quite wrong as the board-school teacher. County councils do not engage budding Romeos, still less Romeos who have budded, and Mr. Portman made valiant if quite unsuccessful efforts to discard the romantic style and get down to a pinched and prose gentility. Perhaps, however, Mr. Maugham has met a teacher resembling a film-star in embryo and given stage directions accordingly, in which case Mr. Portman is not to blame.

But most of the other people were really well done. Miss Angela Baddeley's Florrie was a cameo of shining nastiness; one boggled at this actress's imaginative courage. Miss Cecily Oates succeeded beautifully as the drab wife divided in her loyalties. As a manicurist (Pinero, 1899) Miss Diana Hamilton was very amusing, and as a harlot (Galsworthy, any date) Miss Laura Cowie was traditionally

effective. Later on her impersonation of Death had majesty. Mr. S. Victor Stanley did some more of that artful dodging of which he is the past-master; Mr. Antony Holles kept the barber's shop as to the manner born, and very nearly the best thing in the whole play was the overbrimmed bowler which at the end of the first act Mr. Clive Morton clapped on Albert the assistant's head. It is only proper to say that the audience was immensely enthusiastic. Perhaps there was good-will about and the general desire to atone for the idiotic reception of that recent play which in my view was as masterly as its successor is indifferent. Or perhaps it was a resolutely cheerful audience and, like Miss Jones in Mr. Maugham's new book of stories, grimly determined to look on the bright side of things.

## A GERMAN TRAGEDY

*Shaftesbury.*

*Thursday, September 28, 1933.*

### "BEFORE SUNSET"

A Play. By Gerhart Hauptmann. English Adaptation by  
Miles Malleson

HERR HAUPTMANN'S first act turned out, when at last we got to it, to be a long-winded affair of explanations and counter-explanations. The upshot of them was that Matthew Clausen, an elderly, wealthy and widowed publisher, had "fallen for" a chit of a village school-mistress. Marry, how? "Quite nicely, of course," because he proposed marriage. Whereat the cynic, bethinking himself of the novel in which the May-December motive has been treated for all time, protests that Clausen had the luck to be a widower, whereas Nucingen still had old Goriot's daughter hanging round his neck. Here once more is the difference between your realist Frenchman and any romantic German. Balzac saw in Nucingen's passion for Esther Gobseck the last flicker of old lechery. Hauptmann sees in it the kindling of a new flame, the late lark singing in contradistinction to senility's last frisk. This at once raises the metaphysical question as to which is the more uncomfortable spectacle, a nasty old gentleman in love or a nice one. When some disgusting old fribble pinches wanton, as Hamlet phrased it, on a young maid's cheek we look elsewhere; when he takes to calling her his spiritual mouse it is the mind which has to be averted.

At the end of the first act it was established that Hauptmann's publisher was as much determined as Balzac's banker to dissolve the whole world rather than let anything in it stand between him and his desire. But with what a difference! Consider the temper of that passage in

"*Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes*," which begins: "Le baron de Nucingen avouait alors soixante ans, les femmes lui étaient devenues parfaitement indifférentes, et, à plus forte raison, la sienne." Consider the, to English sense, shocking naturalism of all that follows. The plethoric Baron, half asleep in his carriage after dinner, is roused by something which he first takes to be apoplexy and then recognises as the overthrow of his being by the vision of Esther in a hired fiacre. All Paris openly discusses the event, and when his wife makes mock of him, Nucingen, who is not blind to the fact that he is ridiculous, says simply and in his atrocious accent: "Madame, ai-je jamais dit un mot de moquerie sur vos passions, pour que vous vous moquiez des miennes?" Superb comedy, to be condoned in this country only if played in the French tongue by the elder Guitry! Obviously, the Englishman's taste for a play in his own language must lean to Hauptmann's heavy and even pious sentimentality. Clausen only half-guessed that he was an ass, and so we found ourselves interpreting that wambling first act in terms of Browning's:

And just because I was thrice as old  
 And our paths in the world diverged so wide,  
 Each was nought to each, must I be told?  
 We were fellow mortals, nought beside.

and remembering, too, that Evelyn Hope had to be dead before her English lover could with propriety breathe his passion.

On the other hand, if you were not poetically minded you thought of the two begrimed sailors in the thick of the Battle of Jutland, one of whom was overheard shouting to the other: "Wot I ses is, 'e ought to 'ave married the girl!" In the second act the old man spilled the beans with the announcement that he intended to make an honest girl of the schoolmistress, as a preliminary to which he began to decorate her with his first wife's jewellery. Here the family stepped in, and the old man went off the deep end about the septuagenarian's right to live what is left of his



life. Once more—though this has reference to the English version alone—we were up against that old stumbling-block, the English belief that to talk money is not nice. Balzac, when he asked how much passion shall profit senility, was also alive to the question of how much it is likely to cost senility's dependents. A great deal of the balance of sympathy in this play up to the beginning of the third act hinges upon the German law of property. I believe, though I may be wrong, that in Germany a man may not leave the whole of his estate to his second wife and away from his children by his first wife. A German knowing this would know whether Clausen's daughters owe their maniacal fury to being threatened with the loss of, say, one-fifth of their expectations, in which case they are four-fifths as compunctionless as Lear's offspring, or to the fear of being thrown naked into the workhouse, in which case they are behaving reasonably, and the parallel does not arise.

I wish somebody would give me an unmuddled play to criticise. My job is difficult enough when I have merely to give an opinion as to how good or bad a play seems to me to be; it would help enormously if playwrights, or their adapters, would get clear in their own minds what exactly their play is supposed to mean. Let me underline this. If a parent brings up a child in the belief that he is to inherit ten thousand pounds, and then, through no fault of the child, goes back on it, he has either obtained all that part of filial respect which is not natural regard through false pretences, or has gone what Mr. Maugham calls potty! (Was it Dr. Johnson who held that toadies whose toadyism has been accepted must not be left out of wills?) Rich old women are regarded as all but technically insane who leave all their money away from dependents and to a cats' home. Why look differently upon a rich old man who wills everything to a scheming puss? If, however, the second marriage merely means reducing the inheritor's little bit from ten thousand pounds to eight, obviously his calling-in of the brain-specialist puts him in the

despicable category. Clausen dies of a fit brought about by the attitude of a family which may or may not be behaving unreasonably. We English cannot tell. However, the theatre remains the theatre, and there are always playgoers who are enormously affected when an old man topples off a chair, for reasons good, bad or non-existent.

It would be monstrous to attempt to assess Herr Werner Krauss's talent by the clever bricks made by him out of this empty straw. (That he is a fine character-actor all those must realise who saw his film-impersonation of Jack the Ripper, a snow-man made of lard with a tituppy walk.) His last act was bound to bowl the audience over, if only for the reason that the actor put into it an exhibition of that which every country except this understands by "acting." In Germany they would no more engage for a tragic rôle a man of no lungs who could not fill the house with sound than we should engage a navvy without arms to manipulate a road-drill. I lack the word which should describe the vocal quality here. It is something away from speech and nearer the chant; it has that swell which distinguishes the organ-roll from the precise articulation of the pianoforte. M. Bovério, who has this note, also bowled his English audience over. Since Benson no English actor has used it except perhaps Martin-Harvey, Ainley, Swinley and Lang, and that is why modern Shakespeare is so little worth listening to! It was the absence of this faculty which marred the Shakespearean performances of Henry Irving, who found in dæmonic idiosyncrasy the substitute which Gielgud finds in reasoned beauty. Hazlitt indicates the quality when he says that Kean's voice in "Othello" was like the sougling of the wind through cedars, and a critic of the first class praised Salvini because in "Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire" he made the words indistinguishable; the audience was supposed to know them, and the sound was the important thing.

In Herr Krauss's last act it could only be the sound that mattered. For here the theatre remained the theatre in the

good sense. The agony was that of a man condemned by his children to worse than death; faced with this we cared little who was in the right and who was in the wrong. The time for reasoning was past, and the dry tones which English actors deem appropriate alike to a committee-meeting and to Lear's:

Why should a horse, a dog, a rat have life  
And thou no breath at all?

which must be wailed, would have ruined Clausen's outburst about having bred nothing but cats, dogs, foxes and wolves, which must be roared. Roar Herr Krauss did, and very finely, though his hesitancy in a foreign language could not quite raise him above the expostulatory. One felt that in German the spate would have been the full cataract. The performance was certainly of that order which makes one want to see this actor fly at Lear, and we wait for this or some other occasion before pronouncing whether Herr Krauss has pathos as well as power. In this last act he expended lashings of the mechanics of feeling; that our throats were not lumpy was probably due to the fact that the actor had overlooked the necessity of getting Clausen liked. The man had been, to an English audience, too hard. He had dragooned us, and as a nation we do not take easily to dragooning.

A distinguished colleague has remarked Herr Krauss's possession of certainly the first attribute of the great player—the power to impose himself on his audience. In short no nonsense about team-work—the theatre's melancholy *faute de mieux*. Nevertheless a good word must be said for Mesdames Joyce Bland and Edith Sharpe, and Messrs. O. B. Clarence, Charles Mortimer and Felix Aylmer, the last of whom provided the best of the play's quiet moments. A more than good word, too, for Miss Ashcroft, who, conceiving the little schoolmistress as another Evelyn Hope, made her of spirit, fire and dew.

## LAST WORDS ABOUT IRVING

October 8, 1933.

THE first half of this full book (*The Autobiography of Sir John Martin-Harvey*) is all about Irving. As time goes on the old man gets bigger; only the other day Mr. Hicks was saying that if Irving could come through a modern door the audience would recognise the stupendous before the actor's hand had left the door-knob. Mr. Craig's superb picture was hardly dry before Mr. Shaw, who for forty years had raked Irving fore and aft with his grapeshot of chaff, contumely and criticism, confessed his "pre-eminence." Now comes Sir John Martin-Harvey to put the coping-stone on the sardonic cathedral. Irving's art had none of the small man's niggling. Did his Hamlet, after deciding that the play's the thing, look round for a pillar whereon to rest his manuscript? Did he then fall to his scenario in letters twelve inches high? Of course he did! And for the same reason that Milton's Satan must have all the sky to fall through, and because of that trifling *optique du théâtre*.

A great actor is greatest with those who play with him; his former pupil recounts that Irving "reduced his lanky figure, when playing Louis XI, to that of a shrunken old man, and he seemed to me, as I knelt as the Dauphin to kiss his hand, actually to smell like one." Most Hamlets take the scene with Osric as a breather; Sir John, who was Irving's Osric, notes his "curious spiritual remoteness, as of a man with the mist of death gathering about him." Irving *knew* he was a great actor and set his private stage accordingly. He insisted on his academic robes being made to trail on the floor, probably because Dante enhanced himself so. On the other hand, he accepted the responsibilities of his state and gave up £11,000 rather than connive at what he deemed to be the Lyceum's de-

gradation. When Ellen Terry asked him where he would like to be buried, Irving replied: "The country will do its duty!"

And now for two first-magnitude quarrels, of which Sir John wins one handsomely, while pitifully losing the other. Referring to Mr. Shaw's statement that Irving "deliberately suppressed the acting of those about him," Sir John asks how many rehearsals at the Lyceum Mr. Shaw attended. He himself, as a member of Irving's company, was present at *all* the rehearsals from 1883 to 1895, and on the strength of this squares up to Mr. Shaw and flatly contradicts him. "I cannot recall a single instance of Irving stage-managing an incident with the purpose of discounting the full effect of an actor's opportunity. Indeed, it was when an actor failed to make the *most* of his opportunity that Irving fell upon him—and quite right too. . . . What recollection of what slight on the part of Irving sends the blood surging into Mr. Shaw's temples, and inspires him to reveal such implacable hate and to write such brazen nonsense?"

The quarrel with Walkley is disastrous, and the full extent of the disaster stares at us from the author's pages. Sir John begins with a grateful reference to one Louis Austin, Irving's private secretary, who "defended my work in face of the scorn which Mr. A. B. Walkley persistently poured upon my efforts. *Requiescat in Pace*. He will—if he can find a corner in Heaven which will provide the urbanity of Pall Mall." Then comes this absurdity: "I once heard the late A. B. Walkley, floundering in a slough of Philistinism, seriously express envy of the actor because he often had the enviable opportunity of kissing pretty ladies when the business of the play demanded it."

How came Sir John's normally quick wits to betray him into concern at A. B. W.'s obvious leg-pulling? The Wednesday articles, as well as the theatre notices, were always impregnated with a subtle mockery, and it is inconceivable that their author could *seriously* express envy of any lover, were he Helen of Troy's! More like him to express envy

of the stage-lover in that he need not kiss in earnest! This matter of stage-kisses would be less than unimportant if it were not that Sir John uses it as the basis for an attack murderous of Walkley's reputation and couched as follows: "Walkley had no understanding, and, therefore, no sympathy for art in any form, and least of all in the art of the Theatre, and why a great journal should have permitted itself to be represented by a man who was so notoriously antagonistic to the art of the Theatre was always a standing mystery." After the phrase, "no sympathy for art in any form," we are referred to a footnote: "I say this advisedly. Please refer back to his attitude about kissing on the stage."

Here it becomes a plain duty to lay it down once and for all that Walkley was never antagonistic to the theatre, but only to that indiscriminating gush which takes every theatrical goose to be a swan. In a world which has its Tolstoy, Wagner, Ibsen, Pasteur, Gladstone and General Booth, sanity insists that a Fred Archer is only a jockey and Irving only an actor. One says "only" in the sense of a recent philosophic statement that "from the cosmic point of view life is a parochial and very unimportant affair." Compared with the whole of life actors are unimportant—a fact which the actor (and very few connected with his profession) cannot and must not see, because if he saw it he would cease to act, and to continue to act he must regard acting as the whole of life and the cosmos as well. Walkley took the larger view, and while making the nicest distinctions realised how tiny was the world in which he must make them. The actor's real grudge against Walkley should have been that while his view of the stage was strict he did not apply the same measurements to his idol Proust and his darling Jane, any one of whose tortuous or natty sentences he regarded as more important than the whole of Harvey's theatre. Which was nonsense.

Sir John insists upon a chartered accountant's explanation of why his London appearances have been compara-

tively rare. Even star actors have families to support, and one agrees that it is asking too much of flesh and blood to play Hamlet at £28 a night in London when the average provincial receipts are £177. Only for one week during its first London run did "The Only Way," afterwards the actor's never-failing standby, pay expenses. But even the provinces made it plain that what they wanted was not Hamlet or Œdipus or Pelléas but Sydney Cartons and Corsican Brothers. All honour to Sir John that he has so persistently carried out a policy which, sitting in his beautiful garden, he once outlined to me. He said that the first duty of an actor who was not alone in the world was obviously to put by a minimum sum against railway accidents and rainy days, that it was his material duty to defend that sum by performing in popular plays, and his spiritual obligation to risk in the cause of better plays anything in excess of that sum. Actors, however, sometimes build better than they know. Producing Maeterlinck's "Burgomaster" out of sheer high-mindedness, Sir John attained a late high peak of achievement and reaped a reward that was wholly low-minded. Perhaps this part and Pelléas were his best things.

Harvey's genius has always been for what the French call *recueillement*, a folding in upon himself. Whether Harvey can ever frighten is another matter. His Hamlet only came within my orbit once, and even then I had to slip away from "Gerontius" at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, to catch a glimpse of the last act. This had an unearthly beauty, though it does not contravene my experience of Harvey as an actor that after the performance the late George Mair should have quoted the remark of a great Irish poet, also present that night in the theatre: "He plays it like a rabbit with a thunderbolt tied to its tail." This accords with Harvey's unique possession of the wistful and the fey and that power of appearing spiritually translated which Mrs. Patrick Campbell put into her own language when, meeting him about to go on as Pelléas and radiating ecstasy in the wings, she widened her great

eyes and cried out: "You look like a moth!" Sir John explains that to obtain ecstasy he used the hair which grows on the breast of the Tibetan yak! Who would have thought this exquisite player to have had so much fun in him?

The book has some admirably expressive writing, as in the account of Ellen Terry's Ophelia. Deep and tender tribute is paid to a devoted life-partner, and there is an attempted justification of the English preference for wedded stars. This does more credit to heart than head. The spectator who has paid cold money is never going to be persuaded that the ill-balance of theatrical swings is compensated by super-poise in domestic roundabouts.



## OLD VIC AND OLD RUSSIA

*Old Vic.*

*Monday, October 9, 1933.*

### "THE CHERRY ORCHARD"

Revival of Anton Tchekhov's Play

MONDAY night bristled with as many points as a Peace Treaty. How would an audience accustomed to the simplicity of Shakespeare, with his hero, knave, fool, take to Tchekhov's compound of all three with a job-lot thrown in? How would this audience take to having its leg and heart-strings pulled simultaneously? How did the Old Vic company, between whom and the enormous house yawned an orchestra-well wide as the womb of Time, propose to put over this most intimate tragi-farce? What would Mr. Laughton make of Lopahkin? And what would his film fans, gathered in cloudy expectation, make of this actor desisting from thunderbolt-hurtling. What would Miss Athene Seyler, a soubrette after Molière's heart, do with Mme. Ranevsky, that part normally drenched with Didoesque grace, nostalgia, and what not?

Now for the answers. The Old Vic audience, turning up in first-class intellectual fettle, uttered no comments that were unintelligent, always with the exception of those broadcast by the intellectuals. One of these, barbered three times o'er and smelling like a nosegay, asked the foyer, "Why doesn't one come here oftener? It's no distance from the Savoy!" Some of the players were more "in" the piece than others, but all of them made a highly creditable shot at the double job of getting themselves looked at through a keyhole and giving the farthest occupants of the gallery what they had come to see and hear. Mr. Laughton, as was to be expected, made more of

Lopahkin than has ever been made in this country. But, as was also to be expected, this great artist put no more into the character than Tchekhov intended, thus blasting the hopes of anybody looking to see him gaze out of window solicitous for bodies interred in the cherry orchard!

Coming to Miss Seyler we must first decide whether there is one Mme. Ranevsky or many. The Carthaginian school finds its justification in Lopahkin's: "You're as splendid as you always were!" and Pishtchik's "Hand-somer than ever, and dressed like a Parisian!" though these may be only boorish compliments. One has come to feel, however, that the play stands for the passing of an order as well as an orchard, in which case it is essential that the texture of this character should be silken. Mme. Ranevsky may have no mind, but if the play is to attain to its maximum pathos and fragrance she must have exquisite presence. I do not quite follow a distinguished colleague who describes Miss Seyler as "too sensible." Is it not possible that the common-sense which my colleague espied was rather a result of the actress's deliberate effort to still her ebullient wit and impose upon her body languors and elegances not usually its line? When it comes to clowning Miss Seyler can play any other English actress off the stage. But being an artist of intense perception she realised that whoever was to do the clowning in this play it mustn't be Mme. Ranevsky, and the result seemed to me to be exactly right, right not in the manner of a great actress showing off, but of the honest craftswoman giving us what her author wrote.

In a highly interesting letter Mr. Hugh Walpole has told us that he discussed the part of Mme. Ranevsky with Mme. Knipper, Tchekhov's widow, who created it. He writes: "She portrayed the same element of seriousness as does now Miss Seyler. I remember very vividly her explaining Tchekhov's intention—that Mme. Ranevsky was not wholly feckless, that her speech about her return to her lover in Paris showed this, and that the cherry orchard was sacrificed for many reasons. Not a character in the

play but is concerned with it." It is a pity that Mr. Walpole did not ask Mme. Knipper to make herself clearer. Or perhaps the Russian word for "feckless" does not quite mean "feckless"? Mme. Ranevsky returns to her lover not out of her, so to speak, feckful sense of responsibility to a sick man, but because she is still in love with him. For this love she would throw everything else to the winds, and with the same tenuity of mind which leads her to disregard the tide of Lopahkin's sermonising, preferring the wavelets of passing chatter. The orchard, says Mr. Walpole, was sacrificed "for many reasons." But whose reasons? Does not the *aperçu* that every character in the play is concerned with the sacrifice merely point to those reasons being Tchekov's? Microscopic examination of the text gives no ground for believing that Mme. Ranevsky did anything except let the mortgage slide, and indeed one has always taken this to be the point of the play. Perhaps Mme. Knipper misunderstood her husband, or perhaps Mr. Walpole misunderstood Mme. Knipper—is it fair to ask in what language the interview was conducted?—and in any case it is regrettable that Mr. Walpole did not ask Mme. Knipper for a list of Mme. Ranevsky's reasons.

Now in this dark forest a doubt assails me. It is true that Mme. Ranevsky came out of the business with £9,000 clear instead of having to exist on the Ruth Draper-ish trees which came to fruit every other year. But this is a by-ending to the play which Tchekov probably hoped nobody would see. The essential point is concern for the things that pass away for ever, and not that Mme. Ranevsky comes with credit out of a first-class business deal. Avoiding the Knipper by-pass and taking the direct route, I shall say that Miss Seyler gave an exquisite performance, happily placed between too-tragic airs and too-comic grimaces. I would further say that Miss Seyler credits Mme. Ranevsky not with sense but with excess of sensibility. At least that is what her acting told me!

Miss Flora Robson's Varya was somehow less moving than I expected; you cannot enlarge the self-effacing, and

in a smaller theatre I can imagine that it might have been the best performance. The medal for this among the subsidiary characters should, in my opinion, be divided between Mr. Leon Quartermaine for his intensely Tchekhovian Gayef, and Mr. Morland Graham for his Firs, whom any actor up to old-retainer weight can act on his head. Miss Ursula Jeans had no trouble with pretty Anya, and as Charlotta, a part which must not be underplayed, Miss Elsa Lanchester, in her zeal and forgivably, wandered off into Strindberg. Mr. Roger Livesey was definitely amusing as Pishtchik, though I prefer that landowner to sport a whiter beard and a dingier smock. Mr. James Mason leered his way successfully through Yasha, and as Trophimof, that undisguisable if invaluable bore, Mr. Dennis Arundell patiently endured our kicks while receiving few ha'pence.

Considerations of space limit me to saying of the production that it seemed excellent, with lovely pyramidal grouping in the second act, though the nursery was too newly furnished, and there is no obvious excuse for not giving us the cherry trees in blossom and the distant town. Anybody challenging this is invited to consult the stage-directions. Wherever I could check it Mr. Hubert Butler's translation seemed to me inferior to Calderon's. The occasional Americanisms come, I presume, from a perverted notion of bringing the play up to date, the proper thing being, of course, to insist and insist again on the play's period, 1904, when Russia had not learned to pull any American stuff, verbal or otherwise.

## TWO HENRYS IN THE FIELD

*Sadler's Wells.*

*Tuesday, November 7, 1933.*

### "HENRY VIII"

Revival of Shakespeare's Play

*Duke of York's.*

*Monday, November 6, 1933.*

### "THE ROSE WITHOUT A THORN"

Revival of Clifford Bax's Play

It is odd that nobody has yet written a play about Henry VIII. Odd, but not unexpected, because that is the English way. It is true that Henry figures in certain dramas, but only in the sense in which, in the popular imagination, King Alfred is the centre of a story about burnt cakes, and King Canute the hero of a beach incident at Broadstairs. Harold dies because he did not keep his eye down and William Rufus because of the unfriendly glancing of an arrow, while a lion-heart and a hump are the salient features of the Richards. Fuss is made about Elizabeth's virginity, Charles II sports his oak, the early Georges cannot speak English, and so on. The evil, preposterous and silly things that monarchs do privately live in the popular mind, provided they come within the scope of What Can Be Publicly Discussed.

Conversely, there is an agreed silence about any abnormality or disease which altered the entire course of English history, attention being by-passed on to some Charter to Wool-Gatherers or Tax upon Invention. Henry's share in the Reformation had infinitely less influence on English history than his failure to reform himself, or one might put it that while the Church took its medicine, the medicine for Henry was not at that

time invented. English history, in so far as it insists on being polite, is a gallery of distorting mirrors.

Mr. Laughton came to Sadler's Wells with all his blushing film-vulgaritys thick upon him. I hasten to say that the vulgaritys to which I allude were thrust upon him by his scenario. This also seems the place to say that I cannot without qualification subscribe to the two-fold view that "The Private Life of Henry VIII" is a good film and that Shakespeare's "Henry VIII" is a bad play. I would rather agree that the first is one of the best slap-stick-and-tickle farces ever filmed and that the second has something about it which, despite its lack of poetry and its straggling tension, makes us reluctant to deny that Shakespeare had a hand in it. Though we rank "Henry VIII" low among Shakespeare's plays and not too high among Fletcher's, any ten minutes of it taken anywhere as much exceed in quality the whole significance of the Leicester Square film as any twenty bars of Beethoven, culled even from "The Ruins of Athens," exceed the entire cake, rag and jazz output.

Mr. Laughton has sensed this, and his performance in the play has a distinction unattempted in the film. But has it distinction enough? This Henry no longer throws chicken-legs on to the carpet. But is it argued that to desist from rank bad manners is the same thing as to put on manners of rank fit for a Cloth of Gold? Has our actor been a little misled by this King's sobriquet? There is treachery in nicknames, and the pitfall in Henry's is to accentuate the bluffness at the expense of the kingliness. It all comes back to the question which must be asked of any "natural" performance. Conceding the naturalness, we are still entitled to demand: "According to whose nature?" Henry was addicted to wenching as Falstaff was to sack, but kingliness must be no more left out in the one case than knightliness in the other. This Henry is hardly ever royal; his bonhomie and his bad temper are alike low-born.

Also, he is not ripe enough in years; his shoulders, the

nape of the neck and the hair over it are too boyish, just as the gestures are too quick, and the man is not heavy enough on his feet for the weight he is supposed to be carrying. Henry was thirty at the time of Buckingham's death and forty-two when Elizabeth was born, figures to which ten years must be added in modern reckoning. It is these ten years that this Henry lacks. Again, Shakespeare's, or Fletcher's, sequence of scenes, and Suffolk's "His conscience has crept too near another lady," imply that Henry was moved to divorce Katharine because of his new-found favour for Anne Boleyn, with the further implication that Henry's long speech about his sonlessness and not standing "in the smile of Heaven" is pure hypocrisy. Mr. Laughton's acting at this point suggests that he reads the speech in this way. In any case, he is compelled to this reading because he has played the scene in which Henry is discovered at prayer as a piece of high fooling. The interpretation is consistent, which does not necessarily make it correct.

The play gives little opportunity to show the tortured, neurasthenic aspect of this many-sided monarch, and one regrets Mr. Laughton's choice of reading. However, I am not going to pose as an authority on Henry VIII—"not presume to dictate"—and will merely record my impression that he was never at any time really happy about his divorce, and that underneath his bluffness he knew as much about the necessity of drowning remorse as any man of the Renaissance. Given Mr. Laughton's interpretation, his performance must be hailed as virile and lusty and full of animal spirits. A man, you might say, who would butt and batter his way through opposition like a ram alike of Nature and artifice. There are times when he lets subtlety creep in, and the passage beginning, "Go thy ways, Kate," is beautifully spoken.

Miss Flora Robson's Katharine began disappointingly, principally because this accomplished actress had not quite got the pitch of the house. Incidentally this was true of most of the company, which, accustomed to the perfect

acoustics of the Old Vic, had not in the first act made the necessary allowances for a theatre less easy to speak in. The ensuing upbraiding of the Court was a trifle shrewish, Miss Robson being a little inclined to scold. But the scene with the two Cardinals was done most sensitively, and the death scene was exquisitely affecting.

About Mr. Robert Farquharson's Wolsey I speak with some diffidence, because none of it seemed to me to be right. This Cardinal did not fill the eye. There was nothing about him of the proud and haughty prelate, as Ouida would have loved to call him, nothing of the founder of colleges, of the great getter and spender whose state vied with that of the King, of the vainglory which aimed through graft at the Papal See. This seemed to me to be a Uriah Heep who had taken orders, and perhaps Wolsey cannot be played with the mind alone. There was superbity about the man, and it is just this quality which is lacking from Mr. Farquharson's repertoire.

Mr. Nicholas Hannen spoke Buckingham's speech with good accent and good discretion, but without being very moving. There is a comely jollity about this actor which stands in the way of the predestined gloom marking your Buckingham. Mercutios do not go to the block, and when they die it is with a word and a jest, and we feel that this kind of dying would suit Mr. Hannen better. He was much handicapped, too, by Mr. Tyrone Guthrie's staging, which deprived him of the crowd the author prescribed. No birds were flying overhead; there were no birds to fly. There were no Tudorbethans for Buckingham to address, and so he addressed the audience directly. This is one of those mistakes in which a production, through being too clever by half, halves effectiveness. In my humble opinion very nearly the best performance in the play was Mr. Marius Goring's Cardinal Campeius.

At the Duke of York's Theatre Mr. Vosper has the advantage of appearing in what is, I modestly submit, much the better play. Here, too, is the best Henry the modern stage has seen or is likely to see. Whatever may



be the authenticity of the Castle Howard portrait, there is no doubt that Mr. Vosper's Henry is a genuine Holbein. Nature and Art have given this actor the little eyes, the cruel dilettante-ish mouth, the muffin-like jowl, and the four-square Tudor head. The ground trembles under this Henry, and if you met him in his nightshift you would still know him to be King of England. This is the man who in his youth has been handsome of feature with a body trained to athletic exploits and a disposition approved by great minds outside the kingdom. One feels that this Henry has come through storms, and that he has been a power with whom it was worth a Pope's while to temporise. Yes, this is a faultless performance, and I don't want anybody to run away with the notion that I hold Mr. Vosper to be a better actor than Mr. Laughton! Both are very fine players in different spheres. One can embody Tony Perelli and the Emperor Nero; the other can give us Mr. Dulcimer and Henry VIII. In the matter of the present comparison Mr. Vosper scores, though it would be only fair if they were to change plays.

The tension which Mr. Bax achieves in his last two acts is extraordinary, and such as any worthy actor would give his ears to be, as they say, "in at." In these two acts Mr. Vosper compels our highest intellectual admiration and some measure of our emotion, without perhaps quite tearing the heart out of us. What Mr. Laughton could do with this material we have no means of knowing. Remembering the blubbing scene in "Payment Deferred," I will guess that his pathos might be very nearly unbearable.

Among the new-comers to the cast is Miss Joan Maude, who plays Katheryn Howard with quiet dignity, which is easy, and quiet charm, which is more difficult. The piece has been well and simply produced by Miss Nancy Price, who keeps her players on terra firma in preference to staircases and landings. In case anybody wants to know which is the second best play now to be seen in London, this is!

## THE SECRET OF ASTAIRE

*Palace.*

*Thursday, November 2, 1933.*

### "GAY DIVORCE"

A Musical Comedy. By Dwight Taylor  
Music and Lyrics by Cole Porter

WHEN early on in the piece so good an actor as Mr. Clifford Heatherley faded out, one prepared for the best or the worst according as the show was discarding from strength or weakness. Was the acting talent so strong that Mr. Heatherley could be safely dispensed with, or so poor that to avoid the danger of comparison Mr. Heatherley had better be got out of the way? It turned out to be the latter. Mr. Heatherley was the one Court card which prevented the hand from being a Yarborough, though as will be revealed later one espied a good-looking nine and a couple of useful eights. These could doubtless have acted but for a natural law which I now discover and lay down. The name I give this is the Law of Deepening Imbecility, and it insists that in the matter of shameless idiocy Art must always go one better than Nature. In other words, even if the acting profession were to set itself to breed players of utter mindlessness the provider of musical-comedy plots must spin one even more mindless. More plainly, musical comedy will always be so unactable that actors are best out of the way.

The present plot is about a young married woman anxious for divorce who mistakes the man she really loves for the professional co-respondent hired for her by her lawyers. This is not to be played, and no attempt was made to play it, though the players adhered rigidly, as to a diet, to the words set down for them, while a concourse of peers and peeresses, nobles and ignobles, and the leading

lights of bench, bar, medicine, art, letters, fashion and the beauty parlour waited Micawberishly for something else to turn up. Presently Mr. Fred Astaire obliged, and there is really no more to be said.

A very distinguished colleague began his criticism of this show by asking what is Mr. Astaire's secret, but like somebody else on another occasion did not wait to give us the answer. May I suggest to my pudic contemporary that the solution hangs on a little word of three letters whose appeal is as constant as that of the hospitals? Mr. Astaire's secret is that of the late Rudolf Valentino and of Mr. Maurice Chevalier, happily still with us—sex. But sex so bejewelled and be-glamoured and be-pixied that the weaker vessels who fall for it can pretend that it isn't sex at all but a sublimated, Barriesque projection of the Little Fellow with the Knuckles in his Eyes. You would have thought by the look of the first-night foyer that it was Mothering Thursday, since every woman in the place was urgent to take to her chinchilla'd bosom this waif with the sad eyes and twinkling feet. It was a great night, for on it Mr. Astaire was born again to the London stage, a star danced, and the mother which is in every woman cried. But what about those of us who are not mothers? To the dull, dotish, impercipient male eye it would appear that Mr. Astaire is neither a stage-shaking dancer nor a world-shaking actor. As a dancer he is not in the Nijinsky class, nor in the Lifar class, nor yet the Lichine nor the Dolin. When he mounts into the air it is by means of a chair and a table, and his descents are similarly accomplished. Nor, I think, has he the gloom and majesty for Brahmsian ecstasy.

You say that Mr. Astaire does not attempt these things, which is what I want you to say. But in my poor judgment neither is he one of The Three Eddies, to whom he stands in the relation of quaver to demi-semiquavers. But perhaps Mr. Astaire does not attempt this either. Then what in heaven's name does he attempt? I take it to be that hybrid known as ballroom dancing, an art

which is compounded equally of the lithe, sinuous panther, the lissome, supple gigolo, and the light-shod, look-slippy waiter who can steer a tray and twenty-four glasses through a crowd without spilling. Even so, there were ballroom dancers before Astaire, and so we get back to the little word with which we started, "only quite nicely, of course!" This charming actor wears the ineffably sad expression that was Jimmy Wilde's up to the moment the gong sounded, and James Welch's in a score of plays, that Tiny Tim and Poor Jo had their share of, and that choir-boys put on with their surplices and leave in the vestry. "Chaplin in the flesh!" said some swooning soul as her eyes closed over the smelling salts tendered by a husband with the gift of prevision.

The remarkable thing about this great little artist is that he *is* a great little artist. Whereas Valentino and other oily dagoes have been wholly repugnant to male sense, Mr. Astaire does nothing to offend, whence it must be argued that his charm has some of Ariel's quality. He is, then, as companionable to the mind as his body is marriageable to that of his dancing-partner. The least knowing judge of dancing can perceive that it is only when Mr. Astaire's art is, so to speak, wedded that it arrives at its full perfection. It was said of Kean that he acted "all round" people; Mr. Astaire dances all round Miss Claire Luce, now shepherding her, not buttressing, here giving her the floor, and there taking it with her in mutual rapture. It is legerdemain accomplished with the whole body, with the result that the eye endlessly follows that which in second-rate artists is second nature, but in first-rate talent is Nature itself.

Miss Luce is a highly accomplished dancer, and given something humanly possible to act might be a considerable actress. Miss Olive Blakeney once more sits around rattling off wise-cracks with machine-gun persistence, and with her rapier-like intelligence puncturing the gas-bags of false romanticism with which musical comedy's lungs are filled. It shows the wilful waste of our stage

that the most Shavian of our actresses should not be acting in Shaw. Mr. Erik Rhodes gives a superb *buffa* performance as a spoof Italian, and provides the one moment in which, incredible to relate, irony is allowed to put in an appearance. The business in life of this Wop is that of a professional co-respondent, whose first thought on taking up his nocturnal quarters is to telephone messages of reassurance to the wife of his bosom. This actor must be heard of again, and it is pleasant to renew acquaintance with Mr. Eric Blore in the well-written and highly diverting part of a waiter who is also curiously Shavian.

The book, it will be guessed, is witty, which largely compensates for the plot. The music is captivating and original, and somebody has devised two excellent "curtains," the first of which comes down on a single questioning chord, while the second shows the entire company in the throes of departure like the last scene of "The Cherry Orchard," only in a major key. Three things remained in the mind after this last curtain was down. These were Mr. Astaire, a chorus as gracious as anyone can remember, and one performance of a badness, effortless and triumphant, which is unparalleled in my experience.

## THE ROAD TO ATHENS

*Lytic.*

*Thursday, November 23, 1933.*

### "ACROPOLIS"

A Play. By R. E. Sherwood

SITTING behind me at Mr. Sherwood's feast of reason and flow of soul were two seeming archæologists and their archæologically-minded spouses, all of whose antique chatter drowned most of the dialogue throughout the first scene of this highly intelligent play. Cleon's opening harangue reached me, then, doubled by a discussion of how if Sir Edwin Lutyens had been Pheidias he would have built the Parthenon; and as my view of the stage was also impeded by some late Britons debating whether they should push into their seats or hang about, I am unable to say whom exactly Cleon was haranguing.

Presently, however, I got a belated glimpse of the haranguer, Mr. Raymond Massey, very taut and strung-up, with a beautiful Grecian nose and otherwise looking like a mixture of Petrouchka and Bil-Bal-Bul. Mr. Massey is a good actor in this, that he can trim his mind to whatever his characters are to think. He can play an idealist and wax passionate over him with some largeness of soul, and it was clever of him to give pragmatistical Cleon an immense amount of purpose and a shut-in mind. If there is any meaning in aristocracy, thought is the most aristocratic thing in the world, and quite rightly Cleon banged a plebeian, loud, unthinking drum.

His point was the old one, that Man's destiny is written not in art-scrolls but in blood, that beauty is neither shield nor weapon, and that when Spartan hordes are busy with battering-rams and catapults it is no good messing about with temples and statues. There is this to be said for this point of view, that in times of panic it has

always prevailed. Just before the war there was some talk of building a National Theatre in London, and before we throw too many of its bricks at Cleon we might profitably ask ourselves whether such building would or would not have been discontinued after August 1914.

The next scene took us to the garden of Aspasia's house, where Miss Gladys Cooper very cleverly insinuated herself into our imagination as something between Lady Blessington and a modern Geisha. Here we saw Mr. Anthony Bushell looking winsome and even fetching as Alcibiades. But should not that glittering hero have been made of sterner stuff? Must he not have had some fury of predestination wherewith to impress his contemporaries while still an unlicked cub? Could that light have been hidden under this Bushell? I could not quite believe in this actor, whereas I should have believed in any of the young players of the *Compagnie des Quinze*. Here, too, was Mr. Charles Mortimer, who as Hyperbolus presented all the brutal, callous suavity of Big Business.

Then there was Mr. Denys Blakelock as Aristophanes, convincing us by his wit of the satirical master in the making. There was an acid mockery and an exquisite detachment about this performance, and author and actor combined to suggest that effortlessness which is the soul of real wit. It was Aristophanes who closed the talk in Aspasia's garden. The symposium had been interrupted by news of Sparta's declaration of war, which brought about the usual hubbub. This dying down, Aristophanes, who had been lost in the martial excitement, was heard mildly saying: "Some of you may have heard that I had a play produced to-night. You can now consider it as not having happened." Very much what any playwright must have said who had a brilliant success on our own August 4.

It was foolish of Mr. Blakelock to run away with the piece in this manner, an imprudence in view of future engagements in which he had at his heels Messrs. Eliot Makeham and Hugh E. Wright. As Anaxagoras, nurse

and tutor to Pericles, Mr. Makeham made a lovely show of old age, silvered and sceptical, and as Socrates Mr. Wright, preferring to abound in his own sense, turned down that pugnacious quibbler's snub nose and gave him eyes of gentle irony and quiet malice. There was a moment when Pheidias in full blast must pause for breath, and Socrates began: "Now, Pheidias, that you have momentarily desisted . . ." The look on the actor's face as he said this suggested something of the attack and gusto with which Socrates would prick even the right sort of windbag, and for a moment we could have wished ourselves back in the age of Plato, or Landor, or anywhere except in the theatre, where good talk is not by itself considered sufficient entertainment. So the bag was never pricked, and Socrates never really had his say, and Aristophanes made up to him for it by suggesting that they should withdraw into another room and sit on opposite sides of it and argue which side was which! Undoubtedly the evening belonged to this minor trio.

There was a good deal of talk about Pericles, whom, alas! we never saw, but who loomed in our imagination as a kind of Athenian Santa Claus, all beard and benevolence and, incidentally, Aspasia's sugar-daddy. The word "prostitute" fell trippingly from the lips of everybody, including Aspasia and her ladies, and there were some passages in this outspoken philosophy of pleasure which suggested that just as for English taste some plays are too French, so some manners may be too Greek. It seemed odd that the proper thing to do with a night-club queen should be to marry her to the head of the state, which was like suggesting that the right thing to do about Cora Pearl was to marry her to the Emperor of the French. But Pericles, as has probably been observed elsewhere, was a remarkable person, and all that we heard of him in the play outlined him as one who in this country would have built a National Theatre out of the public funds, granted a royal charter to the music-hall promenade, and told the late Mrs. Ormiston Chant to put a sock in it!



As Pheidias and looking like Zeus in the early thirties Mr. Ian Hunter had some fine declamatory passages, not about that silly studio thing, "art for art's sake," but about art for one's soul's sake, which is a very different matter. This Greek anticipated our own poet on the superior permanence of rhyme as opposed to marble, and knew with Gautier that

Les dieux eux-mêmes meurent,  
Mais les vers souverains  
Demeurent  
Plus forts que les airains.

This Pheidias knew that even his own Parthenon must ultimately crumble, and that it is not the manifestations but the spirit of beauty which is eternal. Mr. Hunter here conveyed an inner fire that made this part of the play very moving.

The third act began as well-conducted melodramas normally begin—with a trial scene. Mr. Massey was now very fine as the Prosecuting Counsel, and Mr. Hunter went gamely into the box to defend himself from the charge of having made illicit profits out of the Parthenon materials. But the whole scene was mopped up by Mr. Makeham, who, champing his nutcracker beard with the defiant humility of old age, slyly said that the prosecution had been so convincing that obviously he must confess himself convinced and so plead guilty, that they could sentence him to exile, or death, or any old thing because he wasn't going to live long anyhow, after which he trotted back to his seat with complete indifference. This, on the first night and in the time-honoured phrase, stopped the play.

There followed the scene in the prison-cell with the hemlock dispatch of Pheidias, and then the last scene in the play showing the Parthenon completed. To be just, I am afraid this was a disappointment, first because Mr. Sherwood did not seem to have much left to say, and second because Pheidias and Cleon having departed it was rather like going on too long with "Hamlet." Perhaps all that the play contained in the way of significance had

already been implied, or perhaps I was prevented from hearing words of ultimate wisdom by the ladies behind me volubly discussing whether Aspasia was or was not wearing too many curls, and whether Alcibiades did or did not look like Hermes. Though this annoying chatter did not stop throughout the entire evening, it was useful in that it gave one a clue as to what women-playgoers think about. Never once was the matter discussed on the stage mentioned, and reference was always made to persons, personalities, a mode, a biceps.

Mr. Aubrey Hammond's staging was soundly, if a trifle stolidly, imaginative, and I should probably have deemed Mr. Norman O'Neill's incidental music to be the best since "Mary Rose" that this distinguished composer has given us if it had not been that it reached the audience through a combination of gramophone and loud-speaker which made it, like inferior salmon, taste of the tin. There was no orchestra and no conductor; somebody kept putting records on, with the result that Aspasia's home sounded like dole-night at the local Maison Tellier. I hope this practice of spoiling the ship for a ha'porth of tar will not continue; it is detestable.

What is wholly admirable about this production is Miss Cooper's persistence in appearing in good plays in which there is no particularly good part for her. Aspasia was doubtless the hub of Periclean Athens, but I hope I am not mechanically wrong in saying that it is the outside of a wheel where most of the movement takes place. It was so in this play, though Miss Cooper gave a performance marked by intelligence and spiritual insight, and marred only by being a trifle too "classy." Though as genteel as an icicle, she was about as heartening.

In the matter of the names some purists were vigorous in denouncing the pronunciation of Pheidias with the first "i" short, and young things just escaped from the highbrow nursery were running about the foyer saying that they always gave the sculptor the long "i" of "Fido." I submit that there is some pedantry here, and that "Fiddias" is

the accepted English pronunciation, though the "a" should be given its proper value and the rhyme with "hideous" avoided. It is, however, really a pity that one of Aspasia's young ladies should be called Phais; since the first words of the play are spoken to this recumbent one, and the actor does not breathe who can make the words "Hullo, Face!" sound anything except neo-Georgian.

## MR. LAUGHTON'S PROGRESS

*Old Vic.*

*Monday, December 4, 1933.*

### "MEASURE FOR MEASURE"

#### Revival of Shakespeare's Play

"MEASURE for Measure" has always been an unpopular play, and for a job lot of reasons. It is not "nice." Its subject contravenes the rule of the sentimental English that the way of a man with a maid shall begin with the eyes and stop at the chin. It pours scorn upon every man in the audience who, if he be not a liar, would ask his sister to render him what in comparison with death is a trifling service. One has not died, and one is not a convent novice. But one is sufficient of a mathematician to weigh annihilation, which is total loss, against the shedding of a single virtue, and sufficient of a realist to know that to lose a virtue against one's will is not to lose it at all. In plain English, if Isabella had yielded to Claudio's request she would have been not only more than ever ensky'd and sainted, but a decent sort as well.

What Elizabethan audiences thought of this part of the play it is difficult for us to guess, since encrusted upon those notions must be the inherited layers of Restoration raillery, Victorian prudery, and neo-Georgian flippancy. Plus, of course, that general degradation of all ideas and values which is Hollywood's awful responsibility. Put Claudio's demand to any blonde nitwit of the screen and she will reply: "Sure! I'm no angel. Tell Angelo to come up and see me!" Is not this the world's masterpiece of irony? For 300 years the best English consciences have conspired to persuade us that Isabella was right, while what every man and woman who is honest with himself or herself knows to

be the truth comes to us at last through the filth-ridden mind of Hollywood.

One takes it that the academic objection to this play is represented by something Keats wrote: "The excellence of every art is its intensity capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with beauty and truth. . . . But in this picture (by West) we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness." My own objections to the play are simple. The first is that the Duke in the long speech, "Be absolute for death," talks the most absolute bosh that ever fell from human lips. "Thy best of rest is sleep, And that thou oft provokest; yet grossly fear'st Thy death, which is no more," is on the intellectual level of Miss Seward's: "Annihilation is only a pleasing sleep without a dream." Dr. Johnson, as will be remembered, at once blasted this with his: "Annihilation is neither pleasing, nor sleep; it is nothing!" The rest of the Duke's speech, considered otherwise than as music, is beneath modern contempt!

It is significant that Johnson, who must have hated this play's preoccupation with death, in his notes to it makes no allusion to the main theme. He holds, on the other hand, that "the light or comic part is very natural," though how Johnson came to be a judge of the naturalness of Viennese brothels is obscure. My second objection is that the piece is broken-backed. This is not academic fudge. I hold that the interest definitely stops with the Duke's recommendation at the end of Act III, Scene I: "Haste you speedily to Angelo: if for this night he entreat you to his bed, give him promise of satisfaction!" and Isabella's: "I thank you for this comfort. Fare you well, good father."

Why did Shakespeare funk that scene of excellent dissembling in which Isabella promised Angelo satisfaction? The drama cries aloud for it. Can it be that Shakespeare had this play on the stocks for some time and when he came back to it was in another mood? Or that the people

at the theatre asked him to lighten it? The fact remains that at this point Angelo goes out of the play except for his final discomfiture, and that with Angelo out the play is out, too. Here Mariana steps in, sad pastry for an audience consisting even of Barbauld, More, Edgeworth, Hemans, Wollstonecraft, Martineau, Yonge, Procter, and Ward! And there is nothing left for the sophisticated playgoer except the final touches to that picture of unglossed vice which shows that Shakespeare when he wrote Sonnet CXXIX knew what he was talking about.

Continuing his back-door attacks upon the Shakespearean drama, Mr. Laughton has now promoted himself to that side-entrance which is Angelo. Granted a certain modernity of feeling and that Mr. Laughton's voice has not yet acquired the full resonance for blank verse, it would be difficult to imagine a finer performance. Garbed in black watered-silk Angelo takes the stage like some distressful eagle—for he never quite descends to vulture—and expresses his indecision in perambulation. The hands are folded in a semi-austerity which is only half counterfeit, and in that well-fleshed mask the combat is unceasing. But it is in the continual paces to and fro that the chiefest dread resides, and whenever this soul comes to anchor to deliver his soliloquies of torment the house falls into a hush the like of which is rarely sensed in our theatre. This performance whets the appetite which, after once more tantalising it with that dreary codger, Prospero, Mr. Laughton promises presently to satisfy with his first attack upon the real stuff—Macbeth.

That good actor, Mr. Roger Livesey, tackles the Duke with a will, and his is the kind of success achieved by a wicket-keeper who unexpectedly scores fifty. But the fellow is an arrant *poseur* and dilettante, much more interested in himself than in Viennese morals, which puts Mr. Livesey's sincerity out of court. And perhaps only those who remember how the late Courtenay Thorpe used to say: "Look, the unfolding star calls up the shepherd!"

know how this beautifully cadenced rôle should be spoken.

Admiration of Miss Flora Robson has been so often and so freely expressed in this column that one has no hesitation in saying that Isabella is the last Shakespearean part for which one would cast her. Isabella's lineaments should be, as Gautier might put it, *gardiens du contour pur*; it is this and her sexlessness for which Angelo falls. But warring bronze rather than white and marble wonder bespeaks this actress, whose forte is sensuality in tempestuous restraint. And as Claudio was obviously a well-behaved young gentleman, the great scene between them rather went as if it were Isabella who had come to ask him to redeem some peccadillo of hers, though this, of course, would have necessitated turning Angelo into a mediæval Mrs. Ormiston Chant! And do beings ensky'd and sainted cuff and slap under any provocation? At the line "I will proclaim thee, Angelo; look for't" Isabella fell upon Angelo as Mrs. Nupkins's cook fell upon Mr. Job Trotter and "tore and buffeted his large flat face with an energy peculiar to excited females." Indeed, the cook appeared to have the daintier sense, since, "being a lady of very excitable and delicate feelings, she instantly fell under the dresser and fainted away." Miss Robson has, of course, the excuse that the formalised setting at the Vic does not permit of a dresser. According to the learned Miss Macnamara the Duke's marriage with Isabella allegorically presents Shakespeare's remedy for a corrupt Court; the ordinary playgoer will reflect that handsome is as handsome does, and that with more tantrums in the offing the Duke is getting more than he bargains for.

Mr. Dennis Arundell is admirable as Lucio, that fantastic whom Mrs. Amanda Ros would doubtless have apostrophised as "Student of Ephebism!" The minor parts are all well filled, but it is no discourtesy to the highly distinguished team of players to say that the best members of the cast on this occasion are Mr. Tyrone Guthrie, the producer, Mr. Herbert Menges, who has

composed the music, and Mr. John Armstrong, who has beautified the scene with unimaginably lovely costumes. Since what obviously sets out to be a tragedy peters out half way through the evening, the resolution has been wisely taken to turn the rest of it into the best kind of Cochran revue.

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## WHAT IS A GREAT ACTRESS?

December 17, 1933.

*Les Anglais déclarent que non seulement Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt est la première de toutes les artistes de ce temps, mais même de tous les temps. Ils ouvrent toutes les cataractes de l'admiration pour verser sur cette frêle et nerveuse créature un déluge d'épithètes laudatives. Que diront-ils quand elle sera vraiment bonne?—La Comédie-Française à Londres. F. SARCEY.*

IN an article headed "A Really Great Actress," Mr. Sydney Carroll writes: "Consider the wide range of her (Bergner's) talent. It stretches from every point of the comedic to the tragic. Who would have imagined that this gamin, this perky little baggage, sprawling and splashing her bare legs athwart a chair, lolloping her arms over a table, could so pour out her soul?" At which I call a halt. What is the nature of that soul since upon its out-pouring is to be based a claim for a world-actress? Let there be no misunderstanding. It is not my intention to carp at the triumph which Miss Bergner has achieved in a performance of exquisite sensibility brought off with extraordinary dexterity. My purpose is to ask whether any single achievement can serve as basis for world-claim, and to remind readers of what world-status means. In case Mr. Carroll charges me with making him protest too much, let me quote him once more: "I bow to Bergner as a reed bends to the storm. I sink in her presence as a stone drops in the sea. No memories of Bernhardt beset me. No dreams of Duse cause conflicting comparisons." Of course they don't! Mr. Carroll is too astute a critic not to know the futility of comparing infinitely great artists. But mention of those names does Mr. Carroll's world-trick for him whether he intends it or no.

Miss Margaret Kennedy has used considerable skill in devising a part which should enable our visitor to abound

not only in her own quality but in something which willy-nilly she shares with every other German-speaking actress. That quality is Germanness. A good fourth of the delight of Miss Bergner's performance belongs to that idiom which, in so far as the actress is German, can escape her never; criticism will no more award marks to the actress playing Gemma Jones for her holding in good German logic, forthrightness and commonsense than it will to a French actress, say Mlle. Yvonne Printemps, for her holding in raillery and featherheadedness. Presumably, too, Miss Kennedy took the measure of her model before cutting the suit of clothes. There is nothing new or wrong in this. Sardou was Sarah's tailor-in-ordinary, and D'Annunzio Duse's; criticism will merely make the point that these actresses were greatest when they took their custom over the way to Racine and Maeterlinck, Goldoni and Ibsen.

Then what does Miss Kennedy's little play amount to? It is a *cadenza* on a theme of warm-heartedness, and I insist upon "*cadenza*" rather than "*concerto*," which second term implies architectural qualities in the performer. Miss Bergner combines with miraculous felicity the passionate waif whom Bret Harte first invented with the "little mother" of Sir James Barrie's doting, and drives the composite figure home with German thoroughness. But to fulfil this child is not, histrionically considered, one-tenth as difficult as to grow out of Ibsen's child-wife into the awakened Nora. The one part is played with the tumbling hair, the unruly mouth, and the bare shins, the other with the fully-clothed mind. I have within the last few years witnessed a good many performances which I should rate more highly than Miss Bergner's in this play, simply because the performer had a more difficult task. I will instance the late Clare Eames in Jean-Jacques Bernard's "*L'Ame en Peine*," Miss Flora Robson in Eugene O'Neill's "*All God's Chillun Got Wings*," and Miss Ffrangcon-Davies in half-a-dozen plays. These were grown-up parts demanding the grown mind, whereas Miss Bergner's part at the Apollo is hardly adolescent; it is the

exploration of the child-mind in distress, like that of some Cinderella who has been deceived in her Policeman.

Many readers are doubtless saying to themselves: "Ha! Agate doesn't like Bergner!" Nothing could be wider from the mark. I like her enormously, and agree that the same qualities now on view would still be remarkable if they were pitchforked into, say, "Saint Joan." I agree that the enormous opportunities for irrelevant pathos offered by that masterpiece would enable Miss Bergner, even if she brought no other qualities of mind and spirit to bear, to achieve the same superb feat of misplaying that Mme. Pitoëff does. (Shaw's Joan should be played bone-dry from start to finish; she argues like blazes, and Miss Thorndike's virtue was to make one feel that blazes are her appropriate end.) How, then, can I be accused of disliking the Bergner when admitting that her performance of Joan unseen by me is, if wrong, probably as overwhelming as Pitoëff's, while leaving the entire field open for her in which to be triumphantly right? I do not blame Miss Bergner for non-possession of qualities which, for all I know, may be hers. It is not her fault that her present rôle lacks nine-tenths of all those challenges to sheer acting which must be taken up repeatedly and victoriously before any world-claim can be made. Let them be so taken up, and let me await the event; I am a critic and not a sporting tipster. Jennie Lee broke all hearts as Poor Jo; we did not talk of Mrs. Siddons.

For make no mistake about it! That is what Mr. Carroll and the Press are doing when they set up Miss Bergner in a firmament where there are no little stars, but only blazing suns. Not equal suns, of course, and differing in kinds of glory as the colours of the spectrum differ from each other, yet equal in this, that each flames after his own kind, unquenchably and for ever. In these days of little successes, when film-stars are mobbed and revue-idols acclaimed as if they were great artists, there is a tendency to forget how serious within living memory has been the impact of great artistry upon cultured minds. In acclaim-

ing any new world-actress we must discover her particular equivalent for Mr. Arthur Symons's: "There was an excitement in going to see Bernhardt; one's pulses beat feverishly, before the curtain had risen; there was almost a kind of obscure sensation of peril, such as one feels when the lioness leaps into the cage, on the other side of the bars." Or Mr. Maurice Baring's: "A line charged (by the same actress) with so great a sorrow and so great a load of beauty that one thought Racine must have stirred in his tomb." Or Lytton Strachey's: "There followed the invocation to Minos. The secret of that astounding utterance baffles the imagination. The words boomed and crashed with a superhuman resonance which shook the spirit of the hearer like a leaf in the wind. The *voix d'or* has often been raved over; but in Sarah Bernhardt's voice there was more than gold: there was thunder and lightning, there was Heaven and Hell."

Or if these are not Miss Bergner's line, let us take this: "At the supreme moment of death, all the nobility of which a soul is capable comes transformingly into the body; which is then, indeed, neither the handmaid, nor the accomplice, nor the impediment of the soul, but the soul's invisible identity. The art of Duse is to do over again, consciously, this sculpture of the soul upon the body." Or this: "Réjane's genius was sex bejewelled with every invention of cunning and charm that in civilised history the instinct has forged for its armoury—the sum and perfection of what, in all but the most noble ages, most men have wished women to have instead of high intellect."

But granting that not glamour and not nobility and not sex-cunning are Miss Bergner's note, we have still not begun to exhaust parallel, though we may have to forsake our own day. Generous things have been said about the "salt, stinging honesty" of Miss Irene Vanbrugh's children of nature, and in the theatre next door to the Apollo cheers are hardly done ringing for Miss Tallulah Bankhead. These comparisons are not up to our level, however, for

in the matter of neither lady did anybody prattle about world-status. We must go back to Nell Gwynne and Peg Woffington, Kitty Clive and Mrs. Jordan, and what the town said about them. And there was once an actress called Ellen Terry.

It may be said that none of these fits Miss Bergner; indeed it is not to be held that any one should, since the first attribute of genius is to make its own niche. But this much can be laid down with certainty, that praise for any world-actress must be in tune and harmony with immortal praise which dates not and is imperishable. Remember, too, that charter of greatness is irrevocable and must stand for ever. It is not to be affected by change of mode, and cannot be destroyed or obliterated or whittled away or shelved by anything that is to come after. Infinity can never be less than infinity, and the release of heart and mind which has once been made boundless can never again have bounds put upon it. Can we say that on the strength of a single performance Miss Bergner stands up to all that is here laid down?

It is a commonplace that all great art is the key to a garden in which all great artists may walk indifferently, whether their art be the provocation of tears or laughter, high tragedy or good spirits, a garden whence there can be no ejection on the plea that the privilege was too hastily conceded. That is why the freedom of this parterre must be jealously guarded. Hazlitt said that he hated all those stories about Lope de Vega writing a play before breakfast. "He had time enough to do it after." I see no reason why I, as a dramatic critic living in this country, must thrust upon Miss Bergner that greatness noise of which comes to me through hearsay and divination. Miss Bergner is young and I am old; but if there is time for me to take part in conferring this renown when it shall have been earned there is more than time for her to earn it. One last thing. The passport to immortality demands more than a captivating freakishness; it insists upon the beauty that holds Time captive. Rachel's dark intoning,

Sarah's pantherine grace, Réjane's mettle, Duse's weeping hands, Ellen Terry's chequered sunshine—these abide when lolloping and sprawling shall have gone out of fashion. It may well be that Miss Bergner's passport is to be had for the asking. But she must ask sufficingly and in terms of beauty.

In my hearing Sarah Bernhardt said of one of the greatest English actresses of our time: "*Elle a beaucoup de talent, la petite Camp-belle!*" Shrewd old girl that she was, Sarah was not going to say more about an actress whom she had only seen letting down Mélisande's hair. But then Sarah came of a school where reputations had to be earned not once but many times. When in 1879 she came to London with the Comédie Française, she appeared in eighteen plays, including Hugo's "Ruy Blas" and "Hernani," Dumas's "L'Etrangère," Octave Feuillet's "Le Sphinx," Voltaire's "Zaïre," and Racine's "Phèdre." Here it seems to me is a range of parts upon which an actress is entitled to ask for judgment. Even so Sarcey, who accompanied the troupe, found the English critics too impetuous. "Ils poussent dans le panégyrique à outrance avec une raideur toute britannique." We next find him complaining of their unfairness to Worms and Mounet-Sully:

"En revanche, ils ont *over-praised* Mlle. Sarah-Bernhardt, analysant chacune de ses intonations, chacune de ses attitudes, chacun de ses regards. Ils ont en cela suivi le public qui l'applaudissait avec fureur, qui se pâmait d'enthousiasme, qui semblait avoir perdu la tête. Il fait bon réussir dans ce pays. Je ne réclame point contre ces excès d'admiration. Ils m'étonnent un peu, et voilà tout. Je suis un peu—comment dirais-je?—agacé? Non, le mot est trop vif: je suis inquiet de voir cette distribution peu équitable de bravos."

Like Sarcey, I find myself *comment dirais-je?*—a trifle uneasy at recent critical impetuosity in the matter of Miss Bergner, whom Sarah, I am persuaded, would not have exalted on the strength of a single play of indifferent

calibre. Laying my ear to the ground in the direction of Père La Chaise—for in the ashes of great players live their wonted fires—I seem to sense rather than hear a faint commotion resolving itself into: “*Elle a beaucoup de talent, la petite Bergnerre!*”

## OLD ACTING AND NEW

*Queen's.*

*Thursday, December 21, 1933.*

### "THE OLD FOLKS AT HOME"

A Comedy. By H. M. Harwood

I don't discuss the psychology of the character even with myself. Instinct is the only thing that matters. Argument is wrong always; instinct is right always. I suppose sub-conscious psychology must play some part in one's treatment of a character. But it must be left sub-conscious and subordinate.—MISS ELISABETH BERGNER in an Interview.

I HAVE decided to become mellow, in other words to enter the third of every dramatic critic's four periods. In the first he is boundless in confidence, crying lo here and lo there as world geniuses swim into his ken; at this stage he is criticism's eaglet, staring for more than his years are worth and mistaking every unaccustomed brightness for the sun. In the second period he wearisomely reiterates that there were great players before Alexander. This has contumely for reward, since vanity will not permit the age to believe that it does not in all things exceed all that has gone before. The third is the critic's mellow period in which, finding nobody to hold up his arms, he tires of maintaining the standard and desists from giving battle.

Now he consents that the Siddons was out-Siddonsed yesterday, and that Rachel will be out-Rachel'd to-morrow. Agreeing that Duse is well on the way to next week's scrap-heap, he murmurs that to-day's everything and everybody are magnoperative and pre-eminent, and will somebody pass the port, please! In the fourth or last period he is sans eyes, sans ears, sans taste, sans everything. In other words, he is gaga, and then only is that which he writes believed! Entering, as I say, upon my third period, I must declare Mr. Harwood's play to outshine every-



thing this brilliant writer has done before, Miss Tempest to eclipse the French Réjane and the American Ada Rehan, Mr. Graham Browne to dim our memories of Got, and everybody in the cast to contribute to the greatest first night since Genesis.

Professor and Lady Jane Kingdom are the parents of one Liza Kingdom, a beauty-ninny who is never out of the gossip columns. They also have a daughter-in-law, one Sybil, a vapourish young woman always expecting to find a soul-mate in good-looking young men who are looking for something else. In the opinion of these two daft creatures Lady Jane has long been relegated to the mutch and crutch status, with just enough eyesight to reach to her tambour. Then comes a summer night *à la* Goring Thomas, which in the theatre means moonlight and nightingales, balcony and adjoining bedrooms. So purblind Lady Jane puts Sybil and her would-be seducer next to one another and calls attention to the amorous state of the weather. Whereby about two in the morning there is a terrible shindy in which Sybil and her now victorious lover, Liza and her dope-ridden, pistol-mongering admirer, all collide on the balcony like motor-cars jammed in a fog. In the third act Sybil is going to make a mess of everything by taking her seduction seriously, whereupon Lady Jane intervenes, saying in effect: "Why, because you want to be happy, must you make your husband miserable? I have lied to the Professor and deceived him, in the best French sense, for thirty years during which I have been a faithless and capable wife. When you get a man worth deceiving your husband for, I advise you to do the same. But not until!" It would be unfair to describe the play's charming last-minute twist which comes between this exposition of the Whole Duty of Married Woman and Miss Tempest's good-night curtsy.

Were I still in my second period I should point out that the play is too long by ten of its earlier minutes. In the embittered years I might also have drawn attention to the fact that the effulgently Saxon and concave Professor and

his lady could not by any possible race-theory have produced anything so rapturously raven and convex as their daughter Liza. Heretofore, I might have suggested that Lady Jane's sense and breeding would have long ago turned such a daughter out of the house or dry-bread-and-watered her into some kind of decency. Time was, perhaps, when I might have opined that so boring a character as Sybil called for an actress with the power to make pretentiousness amusing, and that Miss Nora Swinburne is too 'faithful to tedium to make us at any time laugh at it. But the morbid years are over, and therefore I shall simply say that everything in connection with this piece is of a sparkle to make cyphers of Congreve and Wilde, Maugham and Coward.

In the 'eighties there happened a tragic evening when in some new play Mr. Kendal mischanced to be better than Mrs. Kendal, causing lionesses to whelp in the Haymarket. The same thing very nearly happened on Thursday, Mr. Graham Browne achieving a masterly feat of combined make-up and acting. Here was your real Professor, not owlshly imbecile, but indifferent to human affairs because of more engrossing interest in his slides and test-tubes. This actor has never tried less hard to be good, and has never been better. Mr. Ronald Ward gave a polished performance of perfect nastiness, and I should have liked Mr. Frank Allenby better if he had done something about that set of shoulder which suggests that his arms are hung on wires. Was Miss Margaret Rawlings as Liza a shade too strident? But I must not relapse into my second period!

If I say little about Miss Tempest's performance it is because, being babe-admonished and now only learning my business, I am sufficiently ashamed of the thirty years wasted in admiring, only just this side idolatry, a fine player's conscious and calculated art. For this art is conscious and calculated, and its mistress is as aware of her effects as she is of her finger-tips. But she gave no sign, alas, of that subconsciousness and subordination upon

which our new actresses and our bright young critics lambently insist as the basis of all true acting! On returning home after the performance, I found a screed about a Lett actress sent me by a friend who had just seen her at Spitzbergen in a drama entitled "Carry up the Corpse!" My friend did not see this actress's face, but the expression of the shoulder-blades as she dusted the tenantless perambulator together with her symbolic way of putting the Sunday joint into the gas-oven were, it appears, enough to set the Kattegat on fire.

To be serious for a moment, why cannot our young people realise that in art new truths do not turn old truths into lies, or new good manners make old good manners bad? That it is right for a young actress like Miss Bergner to tackle, say, Hilda Wangel "by instinct," does not make it wrong for a great artist like Miss Marie Tempest to play Becky Sharp or Lady Jane Kingdom "by argument." Let our young artists and young critics lay down such part of æsthetic law as they are capable of inventing, and we will listen to them. But a great deal happened before they were born, and they should keep their hands off it.

## CRITICISM WITHOUT TEARS

*Embassy.*

*Thursday, December 28, 1933.*

### "WITHOUT WITNESS"

A Play. By Anthony Armstrong and Harold Simpson

I HAVE received a large number of letters asking why my appreciation last week of Miss Marie Tempest's performance in "The Old Folks at Home" should be so "disparaging," "sniffy," and "ambiguous." What happened was this, and in case this should be insufficiently clear, this is what happened. I cited a recent pronunciamento that an actress performing Lady Macbeth, Hedda Gabler, or Sweet Lavender must ask herself no questions about these characters' psychology; it is her business to act these parts without knowing how or why, *i.e.* subconsciously. I then pointed out that Miss Tempest knew more about the how and why of her characters than any other actress living, that her present performance was a supreme example of this, and that if the pronunciamento was well-grounded, Miss Tempest's performance must be adjudged a bad one and she herself no actress. In fact the whole article was, as old-fashioned humorists used to say, writ sarcastick.

But, alas! my jest being unperceived cut no ice, and I think the reason is that readers of dramatic criticism use only the eye for reading and not the mind! It was ever thus. I remember, in an old article anent some Fifeshire golf competition, describing how that great player Sandy Herd was the last to go out in the second round, and how the hour was getting late. I recall that I began my article: "The curlew tolls the knell of parting day; the waggling Herd drives slowly off the tee." I realised afterwards that this pleasing fantasy had been a pure waste of time, since

no reader of the *Kirkcaldy Sentinel and Clackmannan Argus* would suspect an echo. So it is with readers of dramatic criticism who do not suspect echoes because they do not welcome echoes. A distinguished Civil Servant said to me the other day: "I don't want dramatic criticism to be allusive. I can read Shakespeare's good things for myself, and if I want to know what it is that Balzac describes as 'the sun of the dead' I know a man in Yorkshire who has a copy!" Absently I murmured: "Quel écrivain vous feriez si vous aviez moins des idées d'autrui!" My friend, who never listens, went on: "All I want a dramatic critic to tell me is what a play is about and how it is acted, and if he does it in words of one syllable so much the better!" This, in my new mood, is O.K. with me. It suits my mellow period exactly.

The title of the new play at the Embassy means that somebody did something with nobody looking on. That something was that crime which in unhappier days I should have said sent Heaven's cherubim to saddle to blow the horrid deed in every eye. To-day I merely say that the deed was murder, and that murder is an act having three branches. It is to act, to do, and to perform, meaning a person to commit murder, an implement to commit it with, and a second person to do it on. The person who does the murder at the Embassy is Phyllis Treyford, the thing she does it with is a sleeping-draught, and the man she does-in is her husband, Maurice Treyford. Phyllis's defence to the charge was that she only administered enough of the poison to quieten her husband, after which she went into the bedroom to cut a cabbage-leaf and make an apple-pie bed, to find on returning to the sitting-room that all the gunpowder had run out of the heels of her husband's boots. *Anglice*, he had snuffed it.

Careless-like, the poor wretch then put the fatal bottle in her reticule and went off to the flat of her former husband, to whom she spilled considerable beans. The ex-husband, not being a raving lunatic, immediately told

the self-made widow what a silly thing she had done. "My dear girl," he said, "the first thing the cops will do after examining the tragic loading of your bed will be to look for the stuff that did it. Old man Maurice was a pretty good drinker, but he never swallowed the bottle as well as the drink, so I've just got to go and put it back!" This he did, finding to his discomfiture that an entire posse was before him. But everything has to end happily in the theatre, even in an intellectual eyrie builded in the cedar's top at Swiss Cottage. 'Scuse me, as Miss Frances Daysang in the revue. The Embassy is not an eyrie, there are no cedars at Swiss Cottage which is not in Switzerland, and the houses are palatial. Old habits die hard.

It is good to see Miss Cecily Byrne in a part which requires her to do something other than hang there like fruit, my soul, till the tree die. There is matter here for flourish of trumpets and clash of cymbelines. Mr. Ian Hunter's dinner-jacket is up to anything from pitch-and-toss to manslaughter, and the two artists play beautifully together. Mr. Hugh Wright's Detective-Inspector Mayhew looks like a slightly doped Archangel; certainly everybody at Swiss Cottage loves the pilgrim soul in this policeman with a taste for gardening, and loves, too, the sorrows of his tumbling face. Mr. Frederick Piper, who plays another detective, gives very nearly the best performance of all, because he could be easily mistaken for a detective though there is probably a fallacy here; people mistaken for detectives are invariably bishops up in town for a spree. There is a delicious cameo of a woman-doctor by that excellent actress, Miss Marion Fawcett, and Mr. Douglas Emery plays a lift-boy so well that he must obviously get a rise. His only mistake is to wear a signet-ring; lift-boys don't or shouldn't. It is noteworthy that whereas millionaire managements insist upon canned music, this good and rightly economically minded management still thinks it worth while to engage real musicians. This is such a treat that I stayed in my seat to hear a delightful selection from "The Geisha," and would

still have done so even if the hour had not been post-bibulous.

The foregoing describes in words as near to one syllable as I can get what I think about this play. If my friend who knows a man in Yorkshire who has a book like not the article, why then, belike, he likes it not, perdy!

## BLEST PAIR OF SIRENS

*Lyric.*

*Wednesday, January 3, 1933.*

### "REUNION IN VIENNA"

A Comedy. By Robert E. Sherwood

I SHALL presume that Mr. Gilbert Miller, following current fashion, has warned his principal artists against reading what follows on the ground that it will probably be more about La Fontaine than Miss Lynn Fontanne and turn Mr. Alfred Lunt into a Frenchified stunt. See now what they will miss, for it is my intention henceforth to discard nicety of judgment and with a trowel heap on adulation. So here goes! Miss Fontanne will play you near to tears with a pianissimo cadence; her harmony is so concentrated that not a particle is lost or dissipated; she gives us an enchanting chiaroscuro; at one moment the tone is veiled, then it becomes golden and clamorous as the day. Mr. Lunt achieves a rhythm subtly made up of the pulsations of sensibility; he is proportionate yet vital; he is a melodist with a single line of delicate inflections; he is a harmonist and a weaver of texture.

Now will this satisfy these artists and their impresario? At this point, dear reader, I am to make a confession. I am aware that at the back of your mind is the suspicion that "Agate is a bit above himself this morning." Let me confess, then, that those glowing periods which have so surprised you are taken word for word from an appreciation by Mr. Neville Cardus of the pianist Horowitz. Mr. Cardus heads his essay "The Greatest Pianist Alive or Dead," and making equally few bones, I shall declare la Fontanne and le Lunt to be the greatest pair of stage-players now living. I shall also hold that when in an incredible distant future they take leave of us,



No grave upon the earth shall clip in it  
A pair so famous.

Now is everybody satisfied? I doubt it. Was there not once a musical critic who, addressing Jenny Lind, said: "Goddess, I am to implore your pardon on behalf of a stunted humanity for its inability to find words adequate to its emotions. Your voice has the sublimity of the Heavenly Choir; your beauty is beyond compare, your genius boundless, your trill more amazing than the sun. Saturn's ring is unworthy to crown your head. Before you humanity can but prostrate itself; deign at least that it embrace your feet." At this the incensed diva, who naturally expected more, shrugged her shoulders and asked: "What noodle have we here?" If this story is not true, Berlioz lies. Meanwhile I shall enter into no correspondence about the above. Managers can rush into print and players scurry to the post. They shall demand me nothing; what they know, they know: from this time forth I never will speak word. With which Iago-like sentiment I take leave of this part of my subject.

And now, reader, how would it be if we got back to that normal business of registering without bias and recording without intimidation just what one thinks of any new play? "Reunion in Vienna" is yet another flowering of that most talented and unlucky of dramatists, Mr. R. E. Sherwood. His failures in this country have been "The Road to Rome," "The Queen's Husband," and "Acropolis," and by the same token "Waterloo Bridge" could not possibly succeed. Flatly and without beating about the bush, the fault is that of the English public. One remembers Johnson's growl: "Madam, I have supplied you with a reason. I am not compelled to furnish you with an understanding." Or words to that effect. The essence of the present play is wit, and there is no power either in Nature or outside it to make wit endurable to the English playgoer.

What is worse, the wit is so intentional as to be obviously perverse, since left to itself the play was clearly heading for sentimentality of the "Old Heidelberg" order, in which

case the English playgoer would be found wallowing in it like a kitten drowning in cream. The parties to this reunion are those Viennese aristocrats whom the war drove into exile to earn their living as taxi-drivers, door-keepers, governesses, and what-not. They return to their old capital to renew the taste of former joys and for an evening once more become personages. He that is now a taxi-driver shall again wear his uniform as an Archduke and nephew of the Emperor. Those others, reassuming their rank, will click their heels and raise glasses, curtsy and kiss the royal hand.

Surely here is matter for tears and the coagulate sob of the British matron? But such, regrettably or Heaven be praised, is not Mr. Sherwood's design; the moments of pathos in this play are two, each of exactly sixty seconds' duration. This playwright sees the futility of snatching at past joys, and some of his characters see it too. Dr. Krug, the psychiatrist, sees it perfectly, and, as Elena's husband, insists that Elena shall see it too. Why is it so necessary that Elena should see it? Because Elena was once the mistress of the present taxi-driver and former Archduke, Rudolf Maximilian von Hapsburg. Now, according to psychiatry, if you still hanker after forbidden and semi-forgotten fruit, the thing to do is to have another bite, when you will find that you no longer enjoy it and wonder how you ever did. Wherefore Elena must go to the party and meet Rudolf, after which there will be a period of tears and then peace in the bosom of the psychiatrist's family.

So we get the second act, which is one long duet showing the old lovers behaving like unwise thrushes, unwise just because they are not thrushes but humans. For an hour, and it seems not an hour, we watch the effort to encompass former rapture. But effort, by some miraculous infelicity, is precisely the wrong word, since the outstanding quality of the scene is absence of effort. Here, both in the matter of the dramatist and his players, are *brio* to spare and verve going a-begging. Here is nothing

maudlin, but a keen encounter of minds. It is, of course, Rudolf who pursues and Elena whose resistance has that toughness known only to women. Ever on the point of seeming-yielding she never does, and it is only when Rudolf has abandoned the chase that Elena allows herself to be caught, the whole thing moving with the rhythm and tempo of a Viennese waltz of the best period.

Now how was it played? The answer is—badly in bulk and brilliantly in patches. Badly because nobody got the pitch of the house with the exception of that excellent actress, Miss Bertha Belmore, who, sniffing the battle from afar, took the stage like a war-horse. The Lyric is a large theatre, and everybody on the stage spoke as if it were a little one. This is a matter that ought to be settled long before the opening night. It is the custom during rehearsals for charwomen to be cleaning the gallery; they should be asked whether they can hear. If it be argued that the pitch is different when the house is full, then managers should insist upon a dress rehearsal with the house dressed as well as the actors. It is absurd to cast pearls before swine if you don't cast them within the swine's reach!

Alas, too, that the minor members of the company had the pewter air when what was wanted was tarnished silver! These ex-courtiers looked like provincial dowds and frumps on a first visit to the capital; at no time did they suggest grandeur out of practice. On the other hand, and thanks entirely to Mr. Cecil Parker, the pace was admirably set. It went as fast as one could follow, and one had the experience, unusual in an English theatre, of not knowing what an actor was going to say before he said it.

Of the brilliance of the two chief players there can be no doubt in any reasonable mind, since this is not their first visit and we are not judging by a single performance. Miss Fontanne has all the weapons, offensive and defensive, of a great mistress of comedy. Her face is a perfect instrument for the conveyance of hyper-civilised emotions, for it has twin bases of high sensitivity and pure fun. No

critic would be so injudicious as to say that these lineaments in their assemblage amount to commonplace prettiness; they have Japanese enticement and the lure of a mask by Messel. This actress can listen as well as talk; over and over again she indulges in silent sessions of 'cute thought. She can walk and she can stand still; becalmed in the middle of the stage she looks like some exquisite ship turning all about her to anchorage.

Mr. Lunt is a tremendous fellow, as well as an actor of infinite jest. I shall die without finding an English equivalent for the word *goguenard*, and if one insists upon a single word, that is the only one which gives this actor's quality. In English you might say that he is ogish; in German that he is Baron-Ochslike. His gusto and his zest are amazing, and his present performance is a magnificent example of all-in acting as an all-in wrestler might conceive this art. I think perhaps he ought to give his metamorphosis a touch more of royalty; even when he has re-donned the uniform too much remains of that primeval brute, the driver of Nice taxis. I think also that he just misses the play's best moment, which occurs when the disinherited enter to pay their sad respects. This can only be poignant even for the most caddish Hapsburg, and Mr. Lunt should here show a little more emotion.

I am always being asked which is the best play in the West End. I have been waiting to give the palm to "Reunion in Vienna" by miles, streets, or any other dimension. Nobody except Abel Hermant has treated the subject of monarchs in exile better, and no other writer has treated it so well. There was a great ovation at the finish, when Mr. Lunt came forward and said, doubtless with bitter memories of a former visit: "I hope this is sincere enough to enable us to stay a little while." Alas, that the tales told by hope in the theatre are always too flattering! This piece is so witty and so wise, so completely suited to the grown-up mind, and so full of theatre as the French understand theatre, both in high comedy and in Palais-Royal farce, that it is in my opinion doomed to failure.

## ARIEL AT LAST

*Sadler's Wells.*

*Monday, January 8, 1934.*

### "THE TEMPEST"

#### Revival of Shakespeare's Play

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH said that this play and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" require to be acted by amateurs: "The professional mummer has never made any hand with either play; nor, I think, ever will." Not having seen any masterly rendering by the Uxbridge Strollers or the Chingford Thespians, I shall boldly declare "The Tempest" to be one of my unfavourite plays of Shakespeare. Regarded, that is, not as poetry but as acting piece, which difference I take to be that between fowl and boiling fowl. One agrees with Sir Arthur in so far as one has seen some professional mummers act Prospero. Mr. Ainley played that senile, never-ending chatterbox—Miranda says: "The *strangeness* of your story put heaviness in me" when she really means "length"!—Mr. Ainley played the old codger like a toastmaster celebrating his golden wedding, while another famous actor reminded me of a conjurer in decreasing demand at Masonic banquets. As for the Benson troupe, their distinguished chief used to hang by his toes from the tops of poplars, leaving Prospero to be fulfilled by the stiff engaged for Duncan and anybody else over eighty. I never heard of Irving playing Prospero. Presumably he had more sense. Or hadn't he?

Postage stamps may be saved by readers desiring to tell me that the opinion set down above is uniquely crass. It isn't. In an article entitled "Enchanting Bores" an earlier critic wrote: "Prospero fears that at times he must be boring Miranda, and therein, I think, reveals Shake-

speare's own fear that he must be boring his public. At the last revival of the play, Mr. Henry Ainley spoke and played Prospero beautifully—I cannot imagine a better performance—but I was glad when it was over. Not even this accomplished actor could hide from us the fact that Prospero is sometimes a bore." I am content to be crass in the company of Arthur Bingham Walkley.

Judge, then, of my astonishment to find myself held throughout at Sadler's Wells to the extent of wishing this short play longer and Prospero's long speeches longer still! Why? Proceeding by elimination, let me run over one or two things which couldn't be anybody's reasons for liking this production. Certainly not the scenery, which consisted of an almost bare stage sparsely furnished with logs constructed out of pink Edinburgh rock, an igloo or wigwam made out of the raffia used by Miss Cicely Courtneidge for her production numbers, and three screens similarly fringed. Nor yet the costumes, since Prospero's magic robes would have shamed the Queen of Carnival at that town obviously hinted at in the lines:

The approaching tide  
Will shortly fill the reasonable shore,  
That now lies foul and muddy.

To wit, Southend. Miranda's frock did not help, since it could obviously be worn with only envious comment at any tennis-club dance. Could it have been the music? Or some of it? Mr. Herbert Menges is not to be blamed because his island noises are Mr. Norman O'Neill's all over again. They are virtually as good because they are virtually the same; probably in them we hear the song the siren sang. But the songs Mr. Dennis Arundell makes Ariel sing are another matter. Pedantry may have some excuse in holding that Arne isn't old-fashioned enough, and in insisting upon Jacobean melodies played upon shawms and sackbuts and other strange serpents. But to insist upon steel-furniture ditties for Ariel is modernity at its most despicable.

But I very much liked Mr. Arundell's masque in the classical style, for Purcell could do no wrong, and to my ear spoof Purcell is better than spoof Delius. I do not, however, believe that everything that Iris and Ceres and Juno say should be sung. Taking the Cambridge Shakespeare as guide, I find that Iris has to enter to "soft music," which means that the musicians should play and Iris talk through them. Iris and Ceres have a long dialogue to which Juno adds three lines before the stage-direction "They sing" occurs. Which singing should, I think, end after twelve lines, when Ferdinand compliments the singers with the words: "This is a most majestic vision and Harmonious charmingly."

One knows, of course, that stage-directions are late impositions. The point is that Shakespeare never wrote a lyric to be sung except in short lines, like Juno's:

Honour, riches, marriage-blessing,  
Long continuance, and increasing.  
Hourly joys be still upon you!  
Juno sings her blessings on you.

It is as inconceivable that Shakespeare meant Juno to speak this as that he intended Iris to sing:

You nymphs, call'd Naiads, of the windring brooks,  
With your sedg'd crowns and ever-harmless looks,  
Leave your crisp channels, and on this green land  
Answer your summons; Juno does command.

The difference in the quality of the verse indicates that Shakespeare knew which would be covered up by music and which would not. Why, then, you ask, did he not give Ariel some empty stuff to vocalise instead of "Full fathom five"? There are two answers. But I trespass on Mr. Newman's preserves, and, anyhow, must get back to the play and its acting, in which, obviously, the successful secret must have lain.

Mr. Laughton, having been told that he couldn't play Pickwick, was apparently determined to give us a Prospero incurring no charge of a second failure in benignity. There is some justification for this benign view; the necro-

mancer had his enemies where he wanted them and let them off with a minimum of revenge. Mr. Laughton, by the aid of taking thought and some first-class wiggery, composed a Prospero deriving snowily from Blake, Devrient's Lear, Michael Angelo's Noah, M. Bovério's Noé, possibly Noah himself, and certainly Father Christmas. But, alas, he made the old boy perform his hocus-pocus with a naughty little twinkle in his eye, and never for one moment suggested "the potent wizard brooding in gloomy abstraction over the secrets of his art"! In a word, this was not Prospero but some good-natured spiritual ancestor of Mr. Maskelyne. But, obviously, the power to terrify must be at least latent in the character; how else could he keep the whip-hand over Caliban?

All great actors have their kinks, and always at the wrong time. Bernhardt—and I will *not* be muzzled—told me that she cooed and gurgled throughout Hugo's play because she held that Lucrezia Borgia, apart from that trifle of poisoning, was the most dove-like of her sex. The result was a performance almost as appallingly wrong as Mme. Pitoëff's Joan. Similarly Mr. Laughton seems to have decided that Prospero is a creature out of Dendy Sadler's Wells, I mean world, only too anxious to pass the port, but with a face cherubically set against spirits which may turn out to be evil. Mr. Laughton's failure is, however, more respectable than Sarah's. She was merely following her stock-line of personal fascination, while he purposely discarded familiar face-pulling, mowing and gibbering in order to add to his range. This is extremely good for Mr. Laughton, but hard lines on Prospero.

May I be forgiven for saying that until Miss Elsa Lanchester the part of Ariel has never been acted? Ariel fails if there is the least suggestion of girl dressed up as boy, or even of boy. One must be able to say: "Hail to thee, blithe spirit! Boy thou never wert!" and continue, if our memory is good enough:



What objects are the fountains  
 Of thy happy strain?  
 What fields, or waves, or mountains?  
 What shapes of sky or plain?  
 What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

Now couple this with :

*Ariel.* Your charm so strongly works 'em,  
 That if you now beheld them your affections  
 Would become tender.  
*Prosp.* Dost thou think so, spirit?  
*Ariel.* Mine would, sir, were I human.

Yet though this clever actress invincibly suggests that Ariel belongs to his own kind, we who pretend to set forth what that kind is like are still bound, being mortal, to mortal visions for our parallels. One way of defining a thing is to say what it is not like, and therefore let it be set down that this Ariel bears no resemblance to the portico'd notion of that spirit cherished at Broadcasting House. In the matter of direct comparison he is a mixture of Nijinsky's Faun and Gilbert's Eros, the latter because he too is silvered from head to foot, with the addition of a touch of lovely colour in the red, tiny wings and cape. But this alone would not give us an Ariel beyond the reach of a competent mime or dancer. Miss Lanchester has added lightness, or better, taken away weight; she is imponderable, has no mass, and is as little felt by the island's earth as she is seen by its inhabitants. So impalpable to sight is this Ariel that his body seems to offer nothing to human glances. You see through him. He has a radiance that cannot be explained, and by an ingenious, unwearying, yet unwearisome movement of the arms suggests kinship with that insect creation which, quivering in the sun, puts to shame the helicopter of human invention. Ariel speaks in a voice that is both shrill and soft, and in my view sings as well as Ariel should, since there is no excuse for a coloratura soprano with full bosom and empty head. In short, it is a lovely performance of exquisite invention.

Next we come to Mr. Roger Livesey's Caliban, a

delicious monster compounded of Frankenstein and Petrouchka. There is too much cause to bewail the absence of versatility, so let it be noted that in Mr. Livesey we have an actor who in a few months has played the French peasant in "Martine," the Duke in "Measure for Measure," Pishtchik and Caliban, all equally well. A little time ago we talked of this young player in terms of promise; the terms must now be those of achievement. Trinculo and Stephano are not too well done, and that dismal sextet which is Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo, Adrian and Francisco would defeat any actors who ever lived. Incidentally I cannot understand why Prospero should be some four times as old as his brother. As Ferdinand and Miranda, Mr. Clifford Evans and Miss Ursula Jeans do nicely, and as Iris, Ceres and Juno, Mesdames Margaret Field-Hyde, Flora Robson and Evelyn Allen look like goddesses from the Forest of Elizabeth Arden.

## ONE OF OUR CONQUERORS

*Wyndham's.*

*Thursday, January 25, 1934.*

### "CLIVE OF INDIA"

A Play. By W. P. Lipscomb and R. J. Minney

"EVERY schoolboy," wrote Macaulay in his essay on Clive, "knows who imprisoned Montezuma, and who strangled Atahualpa. But we doubt whether one in ten, even among English gentlemen of highly cultivated minds, can tell who won the battle of Buxar, who perpetrated the massacre of Patna, whether Suraj Dowlah ruled in Oude or in Travancore, or whether Holkar was a Hindoo or a Mussulman." The proper answer to Macaulay booming away with his eternal schoolboy is Mr. Robey's: "Shur-r-r-r up!" Ancient Pistol's: "Under which king, Besonian? speak, or die!" is much more to the immediate point. It would have gone hard with some of us if, under this penalty on Thursday evening, we had been forced to give the name of the king ruling England while Clive was gallivanting about India. As I left the theatre a heated discussion was in progress as to whether the black hole alluded to in the play was or was not *the* Black Hole.

It is all the fault of the way history is taught to us at school. I went to several academies, was never allowed to get beyond William and Mary, and was always forced to begin again with Hengist and eke Horsa. My lucidity in the matter of Ethelred the Unready is still prodigious; Stygian gloom envelops the Georges. I arrived at the theatre, then, "placing" Clive somewhere between Philip Sidney and Florence Nightingale, and because one cannot always be grubbing in encyclopædias, can one, reader? Dramatic critics are not by nature omniscient, and it is

asking too much to expect us to know offhand all about every possible play-hero from Akbar to Xerxes. Wit comes out of a man; knowledge has to be pumped into him.

My scholastic pumps having been capriciously directed, I shall not presume to say in what way the Clive of Messrs. Lipscomb and Minney differs from the Clive of Macaulay or of anybody else, or from the "real" Clive. Or even from my own view of Clive, because I have not one! A Clive that is good enough to be presented by Messrs. Howard Wyndham and Bronson Albery, Mr. Gordon Harbord and Mrs. T. C. Dagnall is good enough for me! Only—a little word that is sister to "but yet" and doth, as Cleopatra says, allay the good precedence—only I would point out that Clive in this play is always shown as either up and about to do, or down and having done. We never see him in action, with the miserable exception of the cheating of Omichand. Here it is clearly demonstrated that later on Lucknow was relieved owing to English superiority in the matter of the three-card or two-treaty trick.

Macaulay pretends that he would not have animadverted upon the Omichand transaction "had not Sir John Malcolm undertaken to defend it in all its parts." I shall never read the Major-General, but should be surprised if he had not in mind what Eliphaz the Temanite said to Job about taking the wise in their own craftiness.

The rest of the time is spent in watching Clive at the concert of the East India Company walk on to the platform and shake hands with the conductor, and again shake hands with the conductor and walk off the platform, but without the intervening concerto. Indeed, the play is only saved from dullness by the interest and resource with which Mr. Leslie Banks invests the chief character. We see Clive before and after fights with his directors, far-flung feats of generalship, and that nasty matter in the House of Commons. And were it not for Mr. Banks we should pine for what has been omitted.

There is a careful study of Margaret Clive by Miss

Gillian Lind, who skilfully shows us that the most heroic of wives cannot be expected to go more than four-fifths of the way a hero's wife ought to go. I forget whether Carlyle wrote a chapter on the hero as family-man; if he didn't he should have done. A great man who is going to add a province to an Empire ought really not to be bothered about little Willie's whooping-cough and little Eva's measles. Conquerors, like sailors, should have a wife in every port, and it cannot be too firmly laid down that the business of a wife is to stay put in that port, however much her husband may solicit to the contrary, and Clive solicited handsomely.

Then again there is something extremely irritating about a heroine who sacrifices herself to her man till he has got used to it, and then throws in her hand; Lady Clive sulking at Walcot is a pitiful spectacle. Or would be if we saw it; but, like most of the play's events, we do not! What we do see and not only hear about is the furniture, most of which actually belonged to Clive and all of which is lovely. There was every temptation to over-decorate this play, and Mr. Laurence Irving is to be congratulated upon having nobly resisted. Indeed one might say that his stage-settings are crafty without being arty.

## LOVE'S LABOUR'S GAINED

*Shaftesbury.*

*Wednesday, January 31, 1934.*

### "SPRING, 1600"

A Comedy. By Emlyn Williams

IT is Spring, 1600, and "sumer is icumen in." But it is also Spring, 1934, and the point is whether West End audiences will be coming in to see this unusual and charming play. My first job, however, must be to welcome into management Mr. John Gielgud and his partner, who, as Irene Idlesleigh would have phrased it, have flung Mr. Williams's work "on the oases of futurity," hoping doubtless that the public will not consign it to "the false bosom of buried scorn." The first-night reception was wholly favourable, and once more one hopes that the tale told by a first-night audience will not prove to have been too flattering. This would be a pity; obviously the entrancing title is the danger. To the man in the street this can only indicate a kind of play he doesn't think he would like, but which if he can only be got to see it enchants him, and which if he never sees it he never stops regretting.

The first act is exceedingly slight, for in it Mr. Williams has no more matter than to explain why Ann Byrd, daughter of William Byrd, the musician, runs away from her home in Essex to become, since female players are not permitted, a boy-player in the company of Richard Burbage. This act is really unnecessary, since this author is craftsman enough to have raised his curtain on Burbage's bedroom and put all that goes before it into a couple of explanatory sentences. But the drama's laws the drama's patrons continue to give, and one of them is that the acts

of your West End play must be, as Mr. Belloc used to say about Army Corps, more than two and less than four. As it cannot take a whole act to show Ann declining to wed an unwelcome suitor, there is nothing for Mr. Williams to do except paint the times, which appear to consist in open-air performances of Byrd's madrigals. Whereby one realises how much in 300 years has happened to the Gulf Stream; anybody who looks forward to open-air carolling in Spring, 1934, is probably courting a wholly un-Shakespearean rheum. Is it not, by the way, rather a mistake for Ann to call her dad "the Father of English music," with Tallis, his acknowledged master, still being sung everywhere? "Smale fowles maken melodye," and perhaps Mr. Williams thought that some of us might need a hint that Byrd was at least high up in the period's musical tree.

While we listen our eyes take in Motley's very pleasant decorations, which do not, however, suggest the worse than Hogarthian frowsts and stenchs of the Elizabethan age. Every brick in Byrd's country-house looks as if it were as newly laid as an egg, while even the farm servants have the air of new-emergence from band-boxes. Which appetisingness is, one submits, not a property of hinds. This impression is further accentuated when we come to the opening of Burbage's playhouse, where each and every spectator is less somebody in his Sunday best than the faithful copy of one of Motley's admirable drawings. It is arguable that the Sunday best of Spring, 1600, had been the Sunday best of Autumn, 1580, or earlier; three suits a lifetime was a fair allowance. But perhaps I am carping, though I should some day like to see a stage-setting which should show the soil at the roots of Shakespeare's poetry to be good honest earth, and not a special kind of drawing-room loam.

The second act starts the real fun, which is in places fast enough to make the prudish furious. It has occurred to Mr. Williams that not only Juliet, but Gertrude, Constance, and each of Richard Crookback's trio of hags

must be played by a boy. To what sort of creature will these Queens fall? Obviously a boy-player upon whom long assumption of the feminine has grafted a mature and ridiculous effeminacy. There have been actors who could play such a part without miraculous distortion of their proper selves. But Mr. Frank Pettingell is not such an actor, and those who saw him in "The Good Companions" will not believe until they behold it the incredible expense of observation and mimicry to which he must have been put. He rides the limpid waters of this comedy like a dolphin, and submerges himself like a whale, coming up to blow in the most unexpected places. Here is a riot of tumultuous glee and zest which would shake a laugh out of Freud, always provided that stern psychologist has a laugh in him. More simply, this is a golden-wigged, full-stomached performance which Pélissier himself could not have bettered.

The third act is largely taken up with the story of one of Burbage's light o' loves, and although Miss Isabel Jeans makes a dazzling display I am not at all sure that the character should not have been labelled "Summer, 1660." One feels that the proper person to emerge from this beauty's closet is the Merry Monarch. What in the meantime has become of Ann, and what of Burbage who should be the play's principal character? Well, the two have never quite loved, and she, after achieving success with her tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide, has realised the folly of wanting Burbage all to herself. So she goes home to marry the tender of apricocks and Saturday-night glee-singer, who in the first act has been dangling after her. But none of this is really important, and Mr. Williams has used it because play-goers insist upon a plot. Where the playwright's mind is, there will his treasure be also; whence it follows that the best of this play is its wit and not its seriousness. As dramatic carpentry "Spring, 1600" is perhaps not a great achievement; as a *divertissement* it is superb, at least for those realising that tongue-in-cheek is as much part of the theatre as hand-on-



heart. And certainly requires more skill. Only the nicest dramatic sense could have given us a Shakespeare of no account, who merely puts his head in at the door to ask for Mr. Burbage, and as quickly withdraws it.

Miss Joyce Bland gets the right number of ounces out of a part from which a world-actress could be safely trusted to wring overweight; she is gracious and charming and does not pretend that Ann Byrd has more than Rosalind's humour and deeper than Viola's pathos. As Burbage Mr. Ian Hunter looks magnificent and acts up to that description of him to be found only in the British Museum and in one other book which it would be improper for me to designate. He carries to a completely successful issue the play's one challenge to eloquence, and it is in this swelling moment that the play declares itself as a labour of love. For the rest, Miss Margaret Webster richly endows Mrs. Burbage with some of Janet Cannot's sterling quality, excellent sketches are contributed by Messrs. H. O. Nicholson, Lawrence Baskcomb, Scott Russell, Valentine Rooke and Ellis Irving, and Messrs. James Rich and Tony Bruce make a pleasing pattern in black and white. In conclusion, one might say of this piece that its parts are more entertaining than the whole. There is good Elizabethan humour in Burbage's bedroom, and there are good Restoration frolics in Lady Coperario's. The play may or may not be a popular success, though on the first night gallery and stalls were of one delighted mind about it. It is certainly choice entertainment for the fastidious.

## BEYOND THE AGATES

*Royalty.*

*Wednesday, February 7, 1934.*

### “WITHIN THE GATES”

A Play. By Sean O’Casey

SAINTE-BEUVE said—and I apologise for so many good things occurring in French—that there were three legitimate kinds of criticism. The first was the critic’s own private judgment to be delivered between four walls and to intimate friends, the note of such judgment being predilection or antipathy. But since the critic is not the universal model and other opinion may follow other moulds, the second sort of critic should put himself on one side and even pronounce against his own grain. Compromise, if you like, but compromise informed by equity and intelligence. The third kind of critic shows lenience and consideration on the score of an author’s standing. So far Sainte-Beuve, in as nearly his own words as I can remember. What a case is one in, then, who on leaving the theatre would have whispered to any of four walls the words “pretentious rubbish,” knew that he had left an audience violently disagreeing with him, and now remembers having loudly spoken of Mr. Sean O’Casey as the grèatest living dramatist but one! So we will cross out “rubbish” and leave the word “pretentious.” Next we will try to see what Mr. O’Casey was pretending, informing our guesses with as much “equity and intelligence” as we can muster. Last, we will endeavour to decide to what extent we were taken in.

But first we must do a little ground-clearing and explain that “pretentious rubbish” is not nearly so offensive as it

sounds. Grandeur of form may well go with vacuity of content, and it is the latter which makes the thing rubbish and the combination of the two which makes that rubbish pretentious. See Swinburne. Mr. O'Casey is a most distinguished craftsman as well as a poet, and as such is obviously incapable of thinking of any subject except in terms of art. "Within the Gates" is obviously a work of art, just as some pictures are works of art in which everything judged by any but the artistic rule is manifestly cock-eyed. Now carry this a step further. We know to our amazement that pictures which make no appeal to the eye may still be works of art, and we have learned to our chagrin that musical compositions which make no appeal to the ear are to be placed in the same category. Is it similarly laid down that a play which runs counter to the mind in its rational functioning may still be a work of art in virtue of its appeal to eye and ear?

Mr. O'Casey's eye-appeal is the old business of Rodin-esque, Volga-Boatmannish stage-grouping—in this case a conglomeration of Down-and-Outs with heads uniformly bowed and all of them thinking everything bloody. The appeal to the ear consists in the splendour of Mr. O'Casey's beautifully muscled prose—or is it poetry?—which is sometimes overlaid and spoiled by music. I find a note scribbled in my programme to the effect that not one word of the great chant at the beginning of the second act reached me. But this was only an unhappy detail. Mr. O'Casey, as we have known, can write all kinds of great stuff, from the scrumptious majestic to the overheard bar-parlour, and he fits both into his pattern adroitly. But does or doesn't it matter what people in a play say? Or is the manner of their talk the only thing? An eminent colleague in a passage of enthusiasm for this play's essential rhythm either let slip or was careful to insist upon the parenthesis: "Whatever one's view may be of its opinion." "Not 'arf hedgin', ain't 'e!" as one of Mr. O'Casey's park-keepers might easily remark. There is a famous line of French poetry—I again apologise—which

runs: "Qu'importe la coupe pourvu qu'on ait l'ivresse?" Modern fashion and my colleague would appear to put it the other way round: "What does the wine matter so long as the cup is gold?" The alternative view is that what Mr. O'Casey's characters say does actually matter. What, then, do they say?

The answer is—a lot of things all couched in the form of groans, moans, grunts, sneers, snarls, yells of rage and whoops of despair. Everything in the garden's unlovely, and there is no health in either flowers or weeds. There is a Bishop who prattles about establishing contact with his fellow-creatures, thrusts his nose in where it isn't wanted, and when appealed to in a case of real distress can only offer the empty formality of words. She who appeals is a street-walker, and his own daughter, for, alas, the Bishop was once a naughty boy! Is Mr. O'Casey's sock in the episcopal jaw what my distinguished colleague means by the persons in this drama being "not particular instances merely, but universals also"?

The young street-walker is the idealised harlot that intellectual Bloomsbury is always running after. She prates rather than prattles, used words like "oblate," and talks about "composing hymns to intellectual beauty." And then she is, I submit, unreasonably inconsistent. She complains that her customers want no more than the French pigeons—third apologies!—to wit, "bon souper, bon gîte, et le reste." And again: "A sigh, a sob of pain, a thought higher than their own from a woman, and they're all hurrying home." But of course! Since at home and from a wife they can get sighs and sobs and thoughts higher than their own in plenty! Yet this idealist takes a man's money and then bilks him. When her drunken old mother complains that she is going to die, she screams at her: "I'd dance and sing if I thought you'd die in an hour!" The Old Woman who begins as harridan ends in the Kathleen-Ni-Houlihan vein, depositing a wreath at the foot of a War Memorial and speaking in purple prose: "O soldier in bronze, cold guard of remembrance for those who rode out

intoning of which half a loaf is so much better than a whole one. The mood of the occasional music alternated between coronachs, dirges and the smash hit of a musical show, and one got rather tired of those Park railings in front of which the whole thing took place.

## PRINTEMPS ET NOËL

*His Majesty's.*

*Friday, February 16, 1934*

### "CONVERSATION PIECE"

. A Comedy with Music. By Noel Coward

THIS piece ought to suit one who, like myself, adores Brighton, admits to being of the Horse Age, and is often accused of knowing what French is about. Yet being a dramatic critic one is necessarily a mugwump, defined by the politician as a person who sits on a fence with his mug on one side and his wump on the other. But that is because plays have a habit of being both good and bad, and when this happens it is one's duty to say so. Whoever first divided the sheep from the goats was the first dramatic critic.

Mr. Coward's new piece shall be divided into the good and the not so good, and we will begin with the latter. It is not so good because of his bigger achievements, and people will not understand that genius need not, nay, must not, always be at full stretch. If Wagner had interrupted "The Ring" to write "Die Fledermaus" people would have thought much less of that delicious work than they did when it was recognised as somebody else's high peak. Mr. Coward tried to forestall this criticism in his choice of title, since not even the British public would expect Mr. Gunn's picture to present Messrs. Baring, Belloc and Chesterton as Michael-Angelesque nudes. A conversation-piece is essentially a small-scale picture, and by his title Mr. Coward hinted at a little play.

Then perhaps the choice of theatre was unhappy, since His Majesty's is a playhouse of great magnificence, where grand opera could be indulged in if wanted. All the appurtenances of spectacle were there—all the presage of

ceremony with not enough to be ceremonious about. There was some talk of a little lady becoming mistress of the Prince Regent, the period being 1811, and such a story—we thought knowingly—must lead up to a grand reception in the Dome at Brighton, or wherever the royal mistresses were flaunted. But nothing of the sort happened; instead we had the usual musical-comedy second-act climax. This found Mr. Coward's heroine in tears on the kind of sofa upon which only Mme. Récamier has ever reclined. Alas that she had indulged in a tirade wholly French which left the audience, like panting Time, toiling in vain after Mlle. Yvonne Printemps! Why French?—Miss Julia Mills might appositely have asked. Frenchification here was the greatest mistake. The end of a second act is the place to bring down a house, and an audience which is already flabbergasted cannot be brought lower than it is.

And then there was the story, a confused affair about a couple of French adventurers whose twists and turns were too much for me. The curtain dropped on the second act with the female adventurer declaring her passionate love for her partner in the presence of everybody in the cast, and rose on the third act with the young woman's lips glued to those of an English marquis. Which caused the adventurer to say: "A trifle vulgar after the scene you made last night!" It was more than vulgar; it was not to be understood. Once more the size of the house mattered; large sentiments loudly declared need a stronger backing of logic than Mr. Coward in this play appears to have started out with. Last but not one, it shall be remarked that Mr. Coward had rationed himself too severely in the matter of wit, preferring to indulge in long passages of sentiment which, between ourselves, is not his forte. Last, I am not too sure about the music. There was far too much of one cloying little tune and not nearly enough of the witty, sparkling stuff whose top-line Mr. Coward invents so happily.

And now for the jewels in the case. To begin with, Mrs.

Calthrop's scenery is almost the loveliest I remember having seen on any stage; nay, I will burn a boat or two, and say that it is the most exquisite. It is not what Joe Gargery would call "too architectooralooral," for the designer has added her own witty observation to the natty Georgian beauty, and in her indoor sets brings the scent and feel of the sea through the open windows. Here again there has been the feminine eye, since no vessel passes and Brighton has notoriously fewer ships than any desert. Mrs. Calthrop's costumes are good, but they could not be so good as the scenery. The piece, as was to be expected in a play that obviously started in band-box vein, is full of tiny strokes of admirable craftsmanship. Things like the first scene, in which no word is spoken and the intensive silence keys up the audience to a giddy expectation. Things like the party scene, which is conceived in the form of a dance. Here, whenever anyone speaks the dancers suspend animation like the figures on a clock that has done striking.

The play is full of such brilliant touches. The wit, when we are allowed any, is, as was to be expected, at once unexpected, mordant and bitter-sweet, as when the ladies of the town meet the town's great ladies. The latter take themselves off in dudgeon, whereupon one of the little ladies says, approximately: "It's very awkward meeting the likes of them; you see, they're the wives of our gentlemen!" The whole production is staged with Mr. Cochran's well-known lavish and perfect taste. In fact, almost too much splendour has gone to a little piece, which if it were done at all 'twere better it were done modestly.

In the nature of the thing there could not be much acting, though there is generous opportunity for poise. Such playing as is possible falls to Mlle. Printemps, who gives a faultless exhibition of wayward charm. There is probably more art behind this blob of heavenly nose than the casual spectator might imagine, and this highly talented actress has to thank Nature for yet another gift—that of self-caricature. She can be more like Yvonne



Printemps than Printemps has right to be, and it is then that her art attains the most significance. As ever, she sings deliciously.

Mr. Coward, who plays the male adventurer, has the air of stepping gallantly into some breach. He has neither the momentum nor the age for the part, and his acting must take refuge in a patterned severity. Miss Irene Browne contributes her sense of style, and Miss Heather Thatcher her sense of gaiety. The young Marquis is pleasantly played by Mr. Louis Hayward, and there is a brilliant performance by Miss Betty Shale, who, as a black-avised harri-dan calling herself Mrs. Dragon, has not a word to say and bears staggering and alternating resemblances to Mrs. Grundy and Miss Mae West.

And now may I suggest that the long French tirade at the end of the second act should be put back into English? Let Mlle. Printemps accept our assurance first that she cannot fail, second that even if she did it could only be a failure in speed, and third that a failure in English is better than a success in any other language. *Moi qui lui parle* am quite certain on this point. In the course of the evening Mr. Coward asks an English oaf if he speaks French. Receiving the reply, "Oui, un peu," he has a mocking: "I never think that is quite enough!" Let me tell him that it is too much for an English audience.

There was a charming scene at the end when Mlle. Printemps was assured of the unbroken and faithful regard of her English public. It was difficult to tell whether she or the audience was the more moved. The evening had begun by being Mrs. Calthrop's; it ended by being that of our distinguished visitor. Mr. Cochran has done right to cry with Théophile Gautier: "Printemps, tu peux venir!"

## TWO COMEDIES OF MANNERS

*Sadler's Wells.*

*Tuesday, March 6, 1934.*

### "LOVE FOR LOVE"

Revival of Congreve's Comedy

How stupid it is to apply moral standards to any work of art! How ten times more so is it to apply to any work of art the moral standards of an age other than that to which it belongs! In our own time Mr. Maugham's "Our Betters," Mr. Coward's "The Vortex," and Mr. Waugh's "Vile Bodies" seem to us, or did so seem a few years ago, reasonable and faithful transcripts of life as it is or was lived by a considerable number of people in these islands. It would be interesting if we could know what would be the attitude to these plays of critics a hundred years hence, wearing not our white waistcoats, but Nasty Shirts or Commonest Blouses. Will they continue in the nonsense of excusing us on the grounds that we were allowing ourselves a breather "from the burthen of a perpetual moral questioning"? Or will they straightforwardly say that we knew these plays to be both true and amusing, and had the common decency to say so?

Perhaps this is to postulate the end of cant? Perhaps the age of cant is already behind us? Perhaps we have ceased putting a dramatist's characters to the moral test and no longer "screw everything up to that"? I am inclined to think that taste has veered in the opposite direction, and that a play which does not pass the improper test is in danger of having the lid screwed down on it. Victorian mentality put the English in an awful difficulty with regard to Restoration drama. Wit, or the taste for wit, never went with whiskers, so that the Dundrearys could only put Con-

grave beyond the pale, while not even English hypocrisy was equal to muffling the legs of its pianos and then sallying forth to snigger over Wycherley. Last week's reception of "The Country Wife" and this week's acclamation of "Love for Love" suggest that we are at last coming round to the view that moral judgments have no place in art, and that plays, like people, are either charming or tedious.

The present coincidence enables us to put to the test a famous judgment of Hazlitt's: "It may be said of Congreve that the workmanship overlays the materials: in Wycherley, the casting of the parts and the fable are alone sufficient to ensure success. We forget Congreve's characters, and only remember what they say: we remember Wycherley's characters, and the incidents they meet with, just as if they were real, and forget what they say, comparatively speaking."

In a great measure one agrees, while jibbing a little at "We forget Congreve's characters." Would it not have been better to say that Wycherley, having found his characters in Nature, invented something memorable for them to do, whereas Congreve, taking Nature as his basis, elaborated his characters to the point of fantastication without finding anything coherent for them to perform? Perhaps Hazlitt was feeling his way to this when he said of Congreve's best play: "It is in essence almost too fine; and the sense of pleasure evaporates in an aspiration after something that seems too exquisite ever to have been realised."

So in a way it is with "Love for Love." Valentine and Ben, old Foresight and Sir Sampson, Scandal and Tattle, even the ladies—all these seem perfectly realised while, even as you watch them, vanishing into the air of their author's exquisite prose. Thus the evening has little to do with the unfolding of a story, but resolves itself into a series of fleeting impressions. One moment you have the illusion of seeing the stage as though Zoffany had grouped it; the next minute it is your ear which is being enchanted with the miraculous orchestration of Congreve's dialogue.

In retrospect, then, what one sees is never quite a play, but some other devising of Beauty for which it is worth sacrificing the excitements of human action and motive.

The performance at Sadler's Wells has an all-round excellence which makes it difficult to know whom to lead off with. Valentine, the hero, is the play's worst part, being no more than a peg for the actor's own airs and graces; Mr. Barrie Livesey provides these in abundance. Ben is the very broth of a part, negating failure, but to which few actors can have brought Mr. Roger Livesey's happy naïveté; he is the young salt to perfection and looks like a drawing by Morland. A colleague's "pig-headed splendour" is so good for Mr. Sam Livesey's Sir Sampson Legend that the wind is quite out of my sails; this ogre looms large and round and over-red, like the sun through fog. Mr. Laughton makes Tattle a delicious figure of fun and under-breeding, a mixture of wiggery and waggery, at once coy and servile, male yet mincing. This Tattle is a *Roi Soleil* about whom still hangs the barber's shop of his probable upbringing. Mr. Morland Graham's Foresight is a saga of senility almost dazzlingly ludicrous, and there is a clever performance of the servant Jeremy by Mr. James Mason. That Mesdames Seyler and Robson cannot make more of Mrs. Frail and Mrs. Foresight merely proves that the play is by Congreve and not Wycherley, and if I fault Miss Lanchester's highly amusing Miss Prue it is only because her hoydenism seems to me urban rather than rustic; such a chit has climbed more steps of areas than trunks of trees.

The grandeur of the evening as both enterprise and entertainment need hardly be stressed. It was graceful of Mr. Laughton to come forward at the close and demand our applause for the three Liveseys, and it was a legendary moment when Sir Sampson took a son in each hand and led them to the footlights.

*Old Vic.**Monday, February 5, 1934.***"THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST"****Revival of Oscar Wilde's Comedy**

THIS old play for a band-box theatre triumphed brilliantly over several handicaps. There was the huge empty well of the orchestra intervening like a Polish corridor. There was the frowsy first act scenery which gave the impression that Algernon lived in a museum. There were his and Jack Worthing's boots, miracles of dingy desuetude, meaning that they looked like cast-offs. And there was Worthing's butler who came straight out of a Gate Theatre burlesque.

Yet in spite of these momentous trifles all the play and some of the acting triumphed. But not all of it, since Mr. Roger Livesey's Jack had not enough manner and Mr. George Curzon's Algernon had too much. Mr. Laughton's Chasuble was out of the right cruet, though his sacerdotal oil could not be said to blend with the vinegar of Miss Elsa Lanchester's Miss Prism. This young actress was recently said by me to have given one of the most beautiful performances I had ever seen; she now gives very nearly, and I really think quite, the worst! I suggest that she should no more essay this Jean Cadell rôle than that distinguished artist should fly at Ariel.

The revival was more than saved by Miss Athene Seyler, Miss Flora Robson, and Miss Ursula Jeans. As Lady Bracknell Miss Seyler, who normally looks like some magnanimous mouse, swelled to Wagnerian size and gave a performance of such bite and gusto that every line was in danger of being lost through being drowned in the laughter greeting the one before. But Miss Seyler knows what she is about, and did not throw away a comma. Personally, I don't think I shall ever again get so much delight out of Gwendolen as Miss Robson gave. She delivered that young

lady's conscious inanities with that throaty intonation she normally uses for approaches to pathos, only emptied of its pathetic significance. This was lovely, and in the mirror of such playing Gwendolen appeared to quiver within the wave's intenser day! She looked delightful, too, uttering cool paradoxes with an air wittily at variance with a hat resembling a bird sanctuary. And then there was Miss Jeans's Cecily, another quiverer, but this time like the grass that groweth in country lanes. She made Cecily brittle with innocence, and one wondered how so chaste a vessel could risk skipping and ambling about that garden. But skip and amble Cecily did, resembling not so much Ellen Terry as a portrait Rossetti might have made of her.

Does the play date? Admirably!

## FOOTNOTE TO SHAKESPEARE

*Alhambra.*

*Thursday, March 15, 1934.*

### "THE MERCHANT OF VENICE"

#### Revival of Shakespeare's Play

The general opinion of Bassanio is unflattering. I don't know why he is considered such a poor specimen of manhood. My impression is that he has great charm.—*Four Lectures.* ELLEN TERRY.

ONE evening in the far-away 'nineties I met Allan Monkhouse, second string among Manchester's dramatic critics, on his way to the theatre. He told me in awestruck tones that he was going to see and write about Irving's Shylock for the eleventh time. I appreciate now, as I did not then, that this gifted critic's trouble was twofold—to endure repetition and to be sprightly about it afterwards. Your newspaper drudge is like your conscientious horse, which has no objection to drinking an odd time or two, but jibs at being led too often to the same old well. Looking round for something fresh to say about this imperishable, deathless comedy and immortal masterpiece, I find myself asking whether it is a good play. I do not mean a good play pedantically, but a play that a person will hurry over dinner to see the beginning and postpone supper to be present at the end, of!

Mr. Granville-Barker thinks little of the piece judging from the fact that in the second series of his *Prefaces to Shakespeare* he allots it only 43 pages as against 122 to "Antony and Cleopatra" and 110 to poor old "Cymbeline." Nevertheless he makes a sufficiently formidable catalogue of the play's merits and says as little as may be about its demerits—the neurasthenic Antonio, the good-

for-nothing Bassanio, the conscienceless and most un-Jewish Jessica, and those crashing bores, the Gobbos. In regard to these last one wonders that the creator of Dogberry and Verges could ever have thought to entertain us with a theme of sand-blindness, until we remember that it is not we but Elizabethan groundlings who are supposed to be entertained. Mr. Granville-Barker holds Shylock to be real, and I suppose that he is real in the sense that he might have stepped out of one of Michael Angelo's cartoons. But I do not find him Jewish, since he lacks the great and constant Jewish virtue—humour. Surely how little Shakespeare knew of the race is shown when he makes the discomfited usurer say: "Give me my principal, and let me go." Any moneylender with one-tenth of Shylock's brains would have had the wit to ask for the interest and let the principal go! But, of course, only a Jewish author can do justice to the Jewish race, and to expect Shakespeare to find jokes for Shylock is perhaps equivalent to inviting Dean Inge to write for the Marx Brothers.

It is interesting to note that Mr. Granville-Barker devotes several pages to showing that Portia and Bassanio are also "real" characters consistent with themselves throughout. We are told that she is at once a great lady and a slip of a girl, while he, "a painfully poor figure by the gospel according to Samuel Smiles," is sound at heart because of the contrition which he shows on receiving Antonio's letter. But consider what a howling cad Bassanio is! He approaches Antonio, from whom he has already borrowed many a time and oft, with a verbiage which adds insult to the proposed further injury: "'Tis not unknown to you." These are the first words of an elaborate and long-winded scheme for borrowing fresh money to repay the old. Antonio's obvious and proper reply is that he has heard that tale before. But let it not be thought that I am carping at Shakespeare's plot; the play has to be got going somehow and that is why Antonio cannot turn his friend down. Now see how much or how little Bassanio protests against Shylock's proposal:



You shall not seal to such a bond for me:  
I'll rather dwell in my necessity.

Those who know anything of the mentality of borrowers will not expect Bassanio to say more, though the perfunctoriness of his protest establishes him as a pretty mean hound.

Then comes the scene of the caskets and all that talk about "gaudy gold, hard food for Midas, I'll none of thee." Why should this Bad Egg, having borrowed as much of Antonio's gold as he could get hold of, suddenly start canting and sermonising like Chadband and Pecksniff put together? Then comes Antonio's letter followed by his friend's:

O sweet Portia,  
Here are a few of the unpleasant'st words  
That ever blotted paper!

Mr. Granville-Barker's comment is: "Shakespeare shows us Bassanio, his heart's desire won, agonised with grief and remorse at the news of Antonio's danger. Such moments do test a man and show him for what he is; and this one, set in bright light and made the scene's turning-point, counts for more in the effect the character makes on us than all the gentlemanly graces of his conventional equipment. . . . Here speaks Shakespeare's Bassanio; and it is by this, and all that will belong to it, that he is meant to live in our minds."

But do not the words "O sweet Portia" show that Bassanio is already getting ready to borrow from his lady the wherewithal to pay his friend's debts, which further loan he effectively pulls off in less than three minutes? Here in my view speaks the real Bassanio, who lives in my mind as the complete and perfect parasite. There are hints that Shakespeare strove against this; probably if Molière had written this play he would have called it "*Le Gigolo Malgré Lui*."

What I am driving at is the old folly of imagining that Shakespeare's characters have any reality apart from that which is given them by the text. Walkley was very sound

and sane about this when he said that "Hamlet" is not "a play of real life, led by people who have independent lives outside it," but that, on the contrary, it is "a work of art contrived by a certain man at a certain time under certain influences and with certain objects." In other words, Professor Bradley's "some precedent *état d'âme* in Hamlet himself" is bunkum. A whole book could be written on the Walkley-versus-Bradley theme, which I shall not pursue here except to say that whichever view be held of Portia must also be held of Bassanio. When Portia says: "Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear" she is no better than one of Ned Lathom's heroines. But would Mr. Granville-Barker permit us to judge Portia on this single aspect of her? Why, then, must we judge Bassanio by his one decent sentiment, which, when you look at it closely, is only the cover to further borrowing exploits? He talks of his friend's "gaping wound issuing life-blood." This appeals to the woman in Portia, and as Bassanio knows her to be a great lady, he reinforces the picture with the cunning touch about Antonio's ancient Roman honour. This does the trick, and when Portia asks what sum Antonio owes, Bassanio is ready with his: "For me three thousand ducats," after which he shuts up like a knife! Whereby we know that Shakespeare knew brevity to be the soul not only of wit but also of spongeing. Now let me disclaim any wish to insist on this portrait of Bassanio. This for the reason that I do not believe that Bassanio exists at all, except as a projection on paper of a personage whose mental, moral and all other qualities veer and shift as the necessities of the plot determine.

To the foregoing is to be added the old point about the wholesale miscarriage of the moral in this play, in which Shakespeare asks us to condemn Jewish spleen, which has reason behind it, and applaud Christian malignity, which has none. Tot all these things up, and really I do not see how to avoid the conclusion that this is a pretty poor play about a Jew who has the minimum of Jewish characteristics, a hero who may or may not be a cad, and a great

lady who at one moment is prepared to buy her lover and at another desires only to stand high in his account :

Yet, for you  
I would be trebled twenty times myself;  
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich.

The wretch has need to be !

There remains, of course, this play's poetry which, by dint of being knocked into me at school, was knocked out of me for ever. If anybody throws a stone at me for this I shall reply with a massive boulder from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch :—"I came first to this play as a schoolboy, and though I got it by heart I could not love it."

The principal characters are nicely taken by Mr. Franklin Dyll, Miss Marie Ney, and Mr. Jack Livesey, and by two of these more than nicely. For the rest Mr. Basil Gill as Antonio plays up to Bassanio's Roman line, Mr. Leslie Holland works at Launcelot like a cohort of Trojans, and as Balthasar Mr. John Sullivan has a terrific success with his single line: "Madam, I go with all convenient speed." On the night I attended the line was delivered with such solemnity and grandeur that the house rose at Mr. Sullivan. But it quickly sat down again to resume contemplation of a set of stage-pictures which would have warmed the hearts of Alma-Tadema, Herkomer and Fildes. Mr. Stanley Bell's production carries us back to the barmy days of British scene-painting, and I for one am not disconcerted. I hold it quite right that old Gobbo should nearly fall into that waterless canal on whose bare bed gondolas are groggily propelled. And I hold it even more than right that the end of the comedy should find Antonio reading in a bird-sanctuary the happy news that his argosies are still *At* at Lloyd's.

## MISS THORNDIKE ENJOYS HERSELF

*Globe.*

*Wednesday, March 21, 1934.*

### "DOUBLE DOOR"

A Play. By Elizabeth McFadden

"WHAT I like about this play," said somebody after the second act, "there's no damned psychology about it!" In my view he was wrong. The play is chock-full of the psychology of murder as the psychologists rather than the poets understand it. The time is past for prattling about withered murder alarum'd by his sentinel, the big bad wolf "whose howl's his watch" and all the Shakespearean rest of it. To-day, Mr. Philip Guedalla gets up at a public debate in the London School of Economics and says off-handedly that "cold blood is what one murders one's relations in." In which he is supported by Samuel Butler declaring the strictness of the Ancients in the matter of the murder of near relations to be due entirely to the magnitude and frequency of the temptation. "The fable of the Erinyes was probably invented by fathers and mothers and uncles and aunts." Miss McFadden's play has to do not with Grand Guignol, whose productions are the chill fancies of literary men, but with the normal happenings of crime. Whether the victim be shut up in a safe or in a hole scooped out of the drawing-room hearth is immaterial. Grand Guignolism would have made this play's murderess build her safe of malice aforethought; this is a normal murder, because Victoria Van Brett finds the means to her hand and, like a sensible woman, uses it.

There is something peculiarly gruesome about the word "cold-blooded," for this implies the dispassionate

committal of deeds which in the hottest blood would be deemed eccentric. To strew one's wife along a railway line or, in the poet's phrase, cut her out in little stars and bury the constellation under the stone flags of the larder, not realising that the police never leave stones unturned and are quick to identify a female from a femur carelessly left lying about—one wouldn't believe that people did such things but for the fact that they do. Then, again, one understands the provocation. As I write a wireless singer, doing herself and Sir Henry Bishop proud, brings me news of what some wife, mistress, sweetheart would do if her lover, coming home after losing a packet on the Lincolnshire tip of Generous Gift, should upbraid her about that wholly unnecessary new frock. She would dance and sing, would she? Can anybody imagine anything more murder-making? Not all of us have at command the primitive methods of Bill Sikes, and so we go to work roundaboutly, via the chemist's, pleading our unweeded gardens. After which, if we are not born murderers, we confess, and the sergeant at the station must interrupt his supper to take down a lot of unedifying details about somebody else's married quarrels.

But if we are the real thing—the murderer who is fulfilling a destiny marked out for him even before Chaos was—we brush the incident from our non-existent conscience, marry again, and so *da capo*. The sin of such a murderer, into whose category this play's heroine falls, is not blood-lust but something that William Bolitho has called "demonic Narcissism." This brings about the murderer's illusion, much stronger than a conviction, because he has never had to convince himself that he is not as other men are, that what is a crime in others is a virtue in him. Victoria is something better than your village virago who, because her husband has winked over a hedge at some pretty filly, now sweetens his morning tea with as much arsenic as would cover a half-crown. She is bitten by the bug of ancestry, an insistent worm in a country which has to make the most of such scant

forbears as it has got, and there is the definite suggestion that Victoria is an American. One understands, by the way, that her country did, in fact, harbour such a crime as that which entertains us at the Globe, and in what other are marriages solemnised in drawing-rooms? Victoria's act, then, is a *crime passionnel*, or would be if we did not use that phrase in an absurdly limited sense.

I am happily immune from the collecting mania, yet I can conceive the man who kills *con amore*, in this sense passionately, the destroyer of his carefully garnered postage-stamps, snuff-boxes, butterflies. Victoria collects ancestors. She pushes into the safe to die of slow asphyxiation the young woman her half-brother has misguidedly married, not because she dislikes Anne's table manners but because the Van Brett strain is about to be vulgarised. Whether it is or not, is of course immaterial; it is Victoria's conviction of this that matters, reinforced by the fact that her brother, Robert, is only her half-brother, whereby hangs an old grievance of alien grafting on to the family tree. The will to murder her own sister, which I suspect to have come to fruition in the original crime, is natural enough. Isn't the most terrible page in a great Russian novel that in which Raskolnikoff, having despatched an old woman, finds himself compelled to do the same by another in a further bedroom? I take leave to think, then, that there is any amount of psychology behind Miss McFadden's play, only it is the new interpretation which gives us not the babbling, Macbeth-like neurotic but the reticent fellow with a job of work behind him and no reason to make a song about it.

Now how does Miss Thorndike go to this, I suppose one must say, unedifying business? Marry, riotously! This actress must really be getting very tired of sending audiences home to better and purer dreams instead of more and more exciting nightmares. Physically, her presentation is superb. Sitting bolt upright in her arm-chair with her composed mask and grey hair, Victoria looks like the Gainsborough Siddons with her hat off.

Not once does Miss Thorndike falter in the task of playing strong drama with a straight face, meaning a twisted lip and a raised, sardonic eyebrow which she might have lifted out of Irving's make-up box.

Then again she has that hunched shoulder which is so much more malevolent than a humped back. In the words of Miss Dorothy Parker's hard-boiled rather than tragic actress, Victoria "has her entrance and her exits," and Miss Thorndike achieves some nerve-shaking sallies out of, and returns through, the double-doors of the Van Bretts' sinister parlour. Executing those crooked manœuvres she looks like a coffin-ship decked out in bunting reminiscent of the costume Mrs. Siddons contemplated, and perhaps used, for Hamlet. And then the deep-set tones of her voice, like the baying of distant bloodhounds; such, you rightly reflect, must have been the vocal inflections of Mrs. Crummles in her original creation of the Blood Drinker. Whether Miss Thorndike could emulate that other feat, whose combined dignity and grace so much astonished Nickleby in conjecture, and Vincent Crummles in reminiscence, our charming actress does not go outside her part to hint. In other plays she has at times betrayed a skittishness suggestive of a capacity and a willingness to deputise for Miss Gracie Fields. On this occasion Miss Thorndike is the personification of grimness without respite, and her final decline from the gaga to the gagissima is Broadmoor's plain herald; the most casual of call-boys would be competent to "certify" Victoria. This play is good fun just because Miss Thorndike never allows us to think that it is at all funny.

Miss Carol Goodner gives one more proof of that astonishing versatility which, unless she is very careful, will stand in the way of her becoming a star performer. The star characters of star actresses should be as much like one another as starfish, and Miss Goodner breaks this law every time she goes on the stage. The diversity of her alert young woman in "Musical Chairs," her nit-

wit blonde in "Dinner at Eight," and now this play's jugged heroine would scare any less sincere artist with thought of the probable consequences—banishment to the outer darkness or, at best, the Northern Lights of repertory.

As the younger sister Miss Christine Silver puts up a very clever performance; she is the born murderess. As the brother Mr. Owen Nares is, justifiably, a little under the weather. The casting is here at fault: what is wanted is an actor of fretful mind and feeble biceps, and not a couth and comely giant who looks able and willing at any time to put Victoria down for the count. Mr. Sebastian Shaw fills in nicely as a wildly inefficient rescuer of these babies. Indeed, my only grumble is with the actor who plays the family lawyer and makes him bewigged and bemutton-chopped out of all semblance to humanity. The result is as though the clothes were to walk on to the stage without any actor inside them. Mr. Henry Oscar has produced the piece excellently. His *mise-en-scène* is one of great tact; the solidity of the Van Brett house constitutes an invitation to whole-hearted belief.



## OUR TRAGIC COMEDIANS

*Old Vic.*

*Monday, April 2, 1934.*

### "MACBETH"

#### Revival of Shakespeare's Tragedy

It was a trick of Racine to begin a tragedy with the word "Oui." This, says a commentator, was a dodge to put the audience into a mood of acquiescence towards the highly improbable story to follow, very much in the way in which to-day's bridge-player says: "Smith will make up a four, won't you, Smith?" "Ah, mais non!" presumably went up from every bosom in the Old Vic audience when it was seen that the curtain rose not on a Desert Place but on a Camp at Forres. I hasten to say that actually the curtain did not rise even where I have just said it did, for the production was in the coy Elizabethan mode, meaning a formalised, unchanging display of a child's box of bricks. It was the ear which was shocked, since it expected the First Witch's "When shall we three meet again?" and got instead Duncan's "What bloody man is that?" prompting at least one playgoer to whisper his neighbour: "What incarnadined nonsense is this?" The fitful gleam of a match revealed a programme-note denying the authenticity of the first Witch Scene, and arguing that "by making the three Weird Sisters open the play, one cannot avoid the implication that they are a governing influence of the tragedy."

Having treasured the programme for further perusal at home, I find that the note goes on to contend: "Surely the grandeur of the tragedy lies in the fact that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are ruined by precisely those qualities which make them great. . . . All this is

undermined by any suggestion that the Weird Sisters are in control of events." At this point I permit myself to remind Mr. Tyrone Guthrie, the producer, that the play is not a tract by Samuel Smiles but a tragedy by William Shakespeare. I have no doubt that Mr. Guthrie can produce authorities to say that the first scene is quite too definitely bogus. It may be; and in any case I am too old a bird and Spring is too much in the air for any dusty quarrel. I shall merely remark first that the bogus collaborator did pretty well to cotton on to Macbeth's "So foul and fair a day" for his Witches' motif, and second that I sympathise with Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch when he writes: "The commentators, ready as usual, surmise that Middleton, or somebody like Middleton, interpolated Hecate. I hesitate to accept this. It does *not* appear likely to me that a whole set of foolish men were kept permanently employed to come in and write something whenever Shakespeare wanted it foolish."

But is that doubtful first scene foolish? I think not. Like Macbeth's dagger it marshals the play the way that it is going. And, anyhow, to open the drama not in murk and storm but the cheerful lighting of a sunny day at Eastbourne belongs to the silly-symphony order of too-clever-by-half producing. Perhaps Mr. Guthrie would like a copy of my treatise proving that Beethoven began his Fifth Symphony at the sixth bar, the Fate Motive having been dug out of the main body and wittily prefixed by Breitkopf and Härtel or somebody. Indian papers and Mr. Newman please copy!

No play suffers more from the formalised setting than does "Macbeth." I am not referring to the indoor scenes. Our fears in that banquet have always stuck deep, despite platters of capons, boars' heads, dolphins, Loch Ness monsters in miniature, and other fry. Where the Elizabethan trick served the play worst was in the Murder Scene, one of the great points of which is that it happens in the courtyard with the hospitable murderers without and Duncan under their watch and ward within. On the

general head, why does nobody ever make the point that to the theatre-goer with three hundred years of representational scenery in his blood the Elizabethan stage is much blanker than it can have been to the Elizabethans? It may be presumed that his ear would tell an Elizabethan that "How goes the night, boy?" is the opening of an out-door colloquy. But modern scenic development has robbed your modern playgoer of Elizabethan word-consciousness, and when somebody calls a spade a spade he expects to see one. This going back to Elizabethan conditions because they were the only ones Shakespeare knew seems to me like saying that Rameau, Couperin and all that push would have refused to avail themselves of the pianoforte if they had known of it. Or would they? Indian papers and Mr. Newman please reply!

The house was packed, and the giddy audience, containing not one sailor in the gallery but four in the pit, were all of Troilus's mind: expectation whirled them round. What like would this Macbeth be? I think it is at once both fair and friendly to say of Mr. Laughton what Hazlitt said of Godwin when, forsaking the novel, he ventured upon a tragedy: "We can hardly think it would have been possible for him to have failed, but on the principle here stated, viz. that it was impossible for him to succeed." Or you might say of Mr. Laughton's performance in this most difficult and testing of all Shakespeare's rôles—except possibly Lear—what the same critic said of Kean's acting when seen from the gallery: "All you discover is an abstraction of his defects, both of person, voice and manner."

Of this actor's voice we knew beforehand that he has very little, and that consequently the surge of passion in the soliloquies must reach us not as a great tide, but in dribblets. What we were not quite prepared for was his failure in mask. Dodd was one of Lamb's darling actors, but I doubt whether even Elia would have regarded that player's "broad moony face" as suited to Macbeth. Mr. Laughton in this part looked very much as we fancy

Dodd must have looked. At its best "the wide champaign of his chops" was expressive of Tartuffe; there were too many moments when a fringe of ignominious whisker conjured up perilous resemblance to Mr. Robey. Add that in such lines as "Prithee, peace: I dare do all that may become a man" the actor let creep into his voice the accents of elvish expostulation last heard at Offenbach's Cnossus. Visually and aurally, then, the part was not rendered at all; the heart and essence of Shakespearean acting were not given because to give these is not in this player's physical means.

But all physicians will tell the sufferer from cardiac disease that his heart has a second line of resistance called compensation. What compensations did Mr. Laughton's acting afford? First one may say a complete intellectual grasp of the character, of which one felt that no nook or cranny had been left unexplored. Everybody expected the Banquet Scene to be a tremendous business, and Mr. Laughton did indeed fill it with the most imaginative horror that I can remember, at the words "Avaunt, and quit my sight!" bouncing away from the ghost and landing half-way up the staircase like an indiarubber cat. This was followed by an exquisite essay in taking comfort; there was real heartache in "I am in blood stepped in so far," and "Come, we'll to sleep" was conceived as lullaby, the sad pair rocking breast to breast.

I have no space to tabulate Mr. Laughton's subtleties, such as the breathlessness of Macbeth's first entrance to his wife, and the feeling round for plausibility after the discovery of Duncan's murder. As against these must be set the fact that the scene of the apparitions failed, perhaps because Mr. Laughton chose not to see them, and preferred to throw himself into a hypnotic trance and babble like a medium at a spiritualist séance in the Cromwell Road. The "To-morrow and to-morrow" speech found him bereft of any notions about it, and the "sere and yellow leaf" passage went for nothing. This takes me back to Mr. Guthrie's pronouncement that the

grandeur of the tragedy lies in the marred nobility of the chief actors. But nobility must come out of your stage-player, and when Macbeth falls he must fall like Lucifer. Mr. Laughton was never within measurable distance of any kind of grandeur, and his performance beginning on the ground knew no heights from which to topple. And the heights of Macbeth are topless. Will this actor play the part better in, say, twenty years? Tentatively one says no, since on the intellectual side improvement is not needed, and the grand manner and miraculous organ are not likely to be attained. Told without sound and fury, the tragedy becomes a tale signifying nothing. If this means that Mr. Laughton is not a tragedian I cannot help it; he remains a great actor.

Miss Robson's forte is emotional hysteria, of which she has quite rightly perceived that there is no trace in Lady Macbeth. But has she found anything tremendous with which to replace it? Lady M. asks to be unsexed, and promptly gives a display of wifely solicitude and mothering which would qualify her at once for one of Sir James Barrie's plays. The justification is that the courage of Macbeth's lady is momentary and fleeting, owing to her having, when she drugged the grooms' posset, taken a couple on her own account. "That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold." Do not believe it! "He that's coming must be provided for," uttered earlier when she is stone-sober, is the key to this fiend in feminine guise. No, I am afraid I cannot regard Shakespeare's bloody-minded virago as anything other than a tragedy queen of the deepest possible dye, to be played in the vein of Mrs. Siddons or Mrs. Crummles, which I fancy to have been pretty much the same thing. Lady Macbeth, as I imagine her, would regard Strindberg's haridans as mere softies, and here again it is largely a physical matter, this time of voice. That great inducting line, "The raven himself is hoarse," tells us that the whole soliloquy must be croaked in the lowest tones known to the female register, rather like Ada Crossley in "He Shall

Feed His Flock." And I *will* have it that for "O, never shall sun that morrow see!" the actress must find the tones that we are told Rachel used for: "Soleil, je te viens voir pour la dernière fois!" and with which Janet Achurch magnificently fulfilled this part and play. If that morrow does see the sun it must be a blood-red disc climbing into a copper sky.

Intellectually Miss Robson is beyond reproach. She has the mechanics of the part well in hand and perfectly conveys what we might call the lady's business side. In the essay from which I have already quoted Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch insists on this aspect of the character, which he illustrates by the story of the young lady whose father had been offered a bishopric. "It was quite unexpected," she wrote to a girl friend: "Papa is even now in the library, asking for guidance. Dear Mama is upstairs, packing." But Lady Macbeth requires more than strict attention to business and a high degree of plaintiveness, and I am not as yet convinced that this fiercely intelligent and finely emotional actress is entitled to be called a tragedienne. If she is, then I submit that the tragedy is of Dryden's colour and not Shakespeare's.

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